Main, Diane: Multimedia Research Assignment #3

Learning from Television

Anyone who has spent time around children or young adults knows that they pick up endless information from television. But how much of it is helpful? Sure, they know the latest hip slang terms and what clothes, toys, and food they're supposed to pester their parents to buy. And some other side "benefits" of excessive television viewing include increasing obesity, diabetes, learning problems, and skewed beliefs, such as negative stereotypes of people with disabilities or of certain groups. So-called "reality" television shows and talk shows that highlight the freaks and anomalies of our society encourage young people to want what they can't have and behave in ways that are socially unacceptable. The major factor impacting the effects of television on young people is parental involvement. Children whose families get rid of their televisions suffer no social or physical consequences; rather, they stand a greater chance of being well-adjusted. Some families choose instead to limit the number of channels they can receive, and they restrict children's viewing to public television, which typically includes only wholesome, positive programming during the day and early evening.

What I found fascinating about this extremely thorough chapter (which ends with 18 pages of glossary, acknowledgements, and references) was an early segment on the history of legislative action regarding television programming and advertising. When I was a child in the 1970s, violence was largely absent from programming on the dozen or so channels we could receive with our rooftop antenna. I vaguely remember the end of cigarette commercials, but I vividly remember commercials for all manner of alcohol products, with an increase during winter holidays. I also remember seemingly endless advertisements for breakfast cereals and toys during Saturday morning cartoons. That part hasn't really changed much. I also remember learning the alphabet, how to read and count, and some of my first Spanish vocabulary from Sesame Street. There is no question that television was and still remains a very powerful medium for influencing young people.

What I found surprising is that a plethora of research has been done on television and learning, and – even more amazing – the research has been consulted in constructing media messages throughout television's history. I never really thought anyone in mass media paid attention to scholars and scientists. It just seemed counterintuitive to me. But, of course, if you want to control the minds of a nation (or a planet!), I suppose you need to study your audience and how they react to your output.

I suppose, then, that I, too, am a victim of the television watching to which I have succumbed over the years: I lack the attention span to thoroughly read this article. It's mostly over my head, frankly. One thing I was able to gather, though, is that television's impact on young people has been historically described and studied as being almost identical in some ways to the effect of the Internet on our youngsters today. Television is still an important part of most children's lives, but the Internet is playing a larger part. Critics accuse both of supplanting traditional childhood activities such as reading books,

playing with friends, and spending time with family. Some other activities I would add to this list are caring for animals, doing chores, and exploring the outdoors. Children don't always need to interact with other humans to have meaningful experiences, but they do need to disconnect from screens and electronics and move, breathe fresh air, and see daylight.

As I said earlier, this article details the huge amount of research done on all things related to children and television. That's very helpful to have as evidence. But I think it's very easy to make sensible judgments solely by consulting common sense. Children eat food that's bad for them, get little or no exercise, and don't think for themselves. Television (when it is not educational in nature) does all the creating and imagining for them. Parents who limit television viewing time and restrict the content of what their children watch will find that their children are healthier and happier. It doesn't really take volumes of research to convince anyone of that.

Seels, B., Fullerton, K., Berry, B., and Horn, L.J. (2004). Research on learning from television. In D. Jonassen, (Ed.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology (2nd ed., pp. 249-334).* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.