Television: America's Neglected Teacher

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Reprinted from the Annual Report 1982/83

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On a cool, drizzly day in late October, Rod Dixon of New Zealand won the New York City Marathon in nearly world record time. Dixon was joined by over fifteen thousand other runners in this annual event, and hundreds of thousands of spectators braved the weather to cheer the runners on their way through New York's five boroughs.

The magic of television brought the New York Marathon into millions of homes. There viewers watched the drama unfold from the mass start at the Verrazano Bridge to the dramatic finish in Central Park. They saw the leading runners trade positions until in the last mile Dixon overtook Geoff Smith to win the Marathon by nine seconds. After Dixon crossed the finish line the audience was able to share with him the elation of his victory. In the preceding two hours, in addition to following the course of the Marathon, the television audience had been treated to informed commentary on running, training for the marathon, the hazards and joys of the sport, and vignettes of the lives of several participants.

ABC's coverage of the New York Marathon demonstrated again what grand entertainment television can be—it also demonstrated again what a great teacher television can be. It would be hard to watch the great spectacle of the New York Marathon and not become a little interested in running—hard, indeed, to watch Rod Dixon's dramatic victory and not imagine yourself in his running shoes. The commentary on the race and the stories of individual participants contained solid instruction on running in general, and on racing in marathons in particular. First and foremost a sports event, television coverage of the New York City Marathon also gave its audience a first-class instructional program on the art of running.

Television is everywhere in our lives, widening our world and shaping our outlook. Television is America's home entertainer and instant informer, a living room salesman, a babysitter, time waster, and mass marketer of culture. Familiar as we are with television, we consistently overlook one of the functions it performs relentlessly, day in and day out: education. Television is America's neglected teacher.

Schools, Television, and Education

In 1983, three blue ribbon panels examined America's schools and found them wanting, unable at present to provide the education needed by our children. These panels set goals for secondary and higher education and made recommendations that if enacted would vastly improve our schools and colleges in the coming decade. For example, in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report* on secondary education in America, Ernest Boyer cites four essential goals for the high school: First, the high school should help all students develop the capacity to think critically and to communicate effectively through a mastery of language. Second, the high school should help all students learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live, through a core curriculum based upon consequential human experiences common to all people. Third, the high school should prepare all students for work and further education through a program of electives that develop individual aptitudes and interests. Fourth, the high school should help all students fulfill their social and civic obligations through school and community service.

*Ernest L. Boyer. *High School, A Report on Higher Education in America*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. New York: 1983

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Big Bird meets an African sculpture in "Don't Eat the Pictures: Sesame Street at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." The adventures of the Sesame Street gang at the Met were designed to interest the children in visiting museums in their own communities.

Acknowledged, but largely unexamined, is the fact that the quality of secondary and higher education depends on the base provided by elementary education and what children learn outside the classroom and before they go to school.* Remediation at the secondary or collegiate level is a slow, costly process. Prevention is cost effective and benefits both the child and the schools. Improving our nation's schools is crucial, but it may take a decade or more. The effective and wise use of television can have major impact within a year.

It is ironical that on the one hand we bemoan the quality of education in the United States while ignoring a teacher that is in the homes of 98% of all Americans. Television has prepared millions of preschool children to read and has motivated them to want to read. It transmits skills, knowledge, attitudes and values, and when it does so systematically through a sustained effort it becomes a highly effective and inexpensive educator.

It is ironical that we look to long-term change in the vast system of America's schools to bring about an improved quality of education while ignoring changes in our use of television that could bring about dramatic improvements in education at a relatively low cost. It is particularly ironical that we attribute so many bad effects to television and credit it with the ability to lower SAT scores and morals without recognizing that even those who deplore television implicitly admit its power as a teacher. The issue is: Shall we harness this power for the benefit of our children and society, or shall we let this power and its promise go largely unfulfilled?

The simple truth is that education occurs both inside and outside the classroom.

*The National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology did include an important set of recommendations for the better use of broadcasting to supplement schoolroom learning.

The school is not an isolated provider of education. It can only work effectively in an environment which supports learning and achievement. If the job of the school is to cure intellectual malnutrition caused by families who do not value and reward learning and by a society which does not promote learning outside the classroom, the job of the school is probably impossible. If, on the other hand, the job of the school is to supplement an already rich intellectual life, the job is likely to be easy to accomplish and exciting for both the teacher and the student.

What Television Can Do

Like it or not, television has become a vital and integral part of the cultural and intellectual life of almost every child. The weekly viewing average among children aged six to eleven is twenty-seven hours, totalling around 1,400 hours each year. Preschoolers, aged two through five, watch even more—thirty-one hours and forty minutes in the average week, for a total of 1,648 hours in one year. By the time a child completes high school, the total exceeds the amount of time spent in the classroom.

The thousands and thousands of hours that children and young adults spend watching television is the overwhelming "fact" of children's television viewing. Yet much more than this is known. Researchers have been studying television and children for over twenty years and have produced more than three thousand scientific reports on its use and impact. These studies provide a base of knowledge for the effective educational and social use of television, but we have made remarkably limited application of what we have learned.

Beyond simple figures on total hours of television viewing, we know that children watch both children's and adult programming. Moreover, after age twelve, they tend to watch only adult programming. A 1979 survey of some 4,000 eight to twelve year olds found their most popular program was "Charlie's Angels." And a *New York Times* reporter who spent three days in August 1983 with the impoverished residents of a Manhattan hotel used as a welfare shelter, wrote: "Many children watch television 'hour after hour.' The plots of soap operas were discussed among children as young as six or seven; 'All My Children' was the favorite."

Children learn from what they see on the screen. They retain information especially well when it is frequently repeated, as in a commercial or a program designed to be both entertaining and instructional. Compared to a teacher or print, television is a slow and inflexible means for passing on information, but it can effectively complement formal instruction.

Television that precedes or supplements schooling can teach a wide range of behavior and skills. "Sesame Street" and the "Electric Company" are two successful programs aimed at delivering both specific skills and the confidence to use them in school. These and other programs encourage positive behavior, from regular toothbrushing to reading competently, from a willingness to share to the ability to cooperate and tolerate differences in others.

Because television is a powerful teacher, it can also stimulate undesirable behavior. Based on over ten years of research, as reported in *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties*,* there is substantial evidence that violence shown on the television screen can arouse aggressive conduct in young and not so young viewers. This problem is not unique to television. "The goddam movies," said Holden Caulfield, J.D. Salinger's 1945

*The National Institute of Mental Health. *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, Volume 1.* Rockville, Maryland: 1982

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creation, "they can ruin you. I'm not kidding." It is because television is ubiquitous and access to it largely uncontrolled that its effect in stimulating antisocial behavior or in projecting demeaning stereotypes of women, blacks and other minorities can be far stronger than that of an individual film or book.

When it seeks to do so, television can motivate children to take an interest in realms of knowledge and activity they can pursue in and out of school. Its impact in developing an appetite for learning ranges from the four year old "Sesame Street" viewer proudly informing his parents that his pillow is a rectangle, to the Saturday morning viewer of any age who gets "sold" on a new toy or amusement park. A family walk in the woods can, more or less by accident, stir a child's interest in botany. A television newscast, similarly, may develop an interest in geology, through coverage of a volcano or an earthquake. If we desire to motivate widespread constructive curiosity, however, television programs should be specifically designed to produce that effect.

Television's utility in teaching can be multiplied when children watch programs with their parents or older siblings. On such occasions, when a child discusses what has been shown and elaborates on it, the effect of what is learned can be increased several-fold. Even having an older relative watching programs silently with the child may signal a youngster that the activity is worthwhile.

We also know that television can show children the world, both as it is and as it might be. This ability of the television camera to bring foreign lands, exotic cultures, scientific discoveries, the mysteries of oceanography and the ocean depths, and the New York City Marathon into every home corresponds directly to that important goal listed in the Carnegie Report: to help all students learn about themselves, the human heritage

Nobel prize winner James Watson discusses DNA with one of the hosts of "3-2-1 Contact," a public television series on science for 8 to 12 year olds.

and the interdependent world in which they live.

We know that television can teach, we know that television can entertain. If it is to be used effectively in the home for educational purposes, it must do both. There is no choice. Children and adults choose what they watch on television at home on the basis of what they enjoy or expect to enjoy, not because a program is presented as "good" for them. Entertaining educational programs must compete in most homes against the attractions and distractions of other activities, including the spectrum of adult programs offered at the same times of day that children do most of their viewing. The products of the Children's Television Workshop, "Sesame Street," "The Electric Company" and "3-2-1 Contact," as well as other shows such as "Captain Kangaroo" and "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" have proven that entertainment techniques can be blended with instructional purpose and content in television programs that are hits with both children and their parents.

The Costs of Television

The costs of educational and entertaining television programs such as these, although they are rising, are remarkably low. While an advertiser must pay $75,000 for a thirty second commercial in ordinary prime time, a sixty minute "Sesame Street" in 1983 costs only $70,000. A full season of "Sesame Street"—one hundred and thirty hours—costs less than eight million dollars. With repeated airings so that children can view at different times of the day, the cost is less than one penny per viewer per episode. As we spend two hundred billion dollars a year on education in America, it is striking that we spend so little on educational television for our children at home.

The amount spent on educational television is not only a trivial fraction of the total spent on education, but it is also small in comparison to the outlays of advertisers and commercial broadcasters on a regular basis. According to a September 5, 1983 article in *Fortune*, for example, a single advertiser—Ralston Purina—spends "an estimated $70 million annually advertising pet foods and cereals on network TV." In 1983 ABC spent $32 million to purchase the eighteen hour "Winds of War" miniseries from Paramount—which put $40 million into producing it—and then promoted the show in four hundred and fifty spot commercials on its own network, using time which it might have sold to others for millions of dollars. When the commercial networks buy or produce children's fare they can acquire a thirty minute cartoon show for Saturday morning broadcast at prices between $180,000 and $220,000.

The Sources of Programming

Programs reach children on their home television screens from three different distribution systems: commercial broadcasting (network or independent), cable systems, and public broadcasting. Each of these makes dramatically different judgements about what to provide and when to provide it.

As the threat of regulation has receded in recent years, so has the volume of children's programming on the major networks. The last regularly scheduled children's program broadcast by a network on weekdays—CBS' "Captain Kangaroo" for preschoolers—was moved after twenty-seven years to Saturday and Sunday early in the morning. Weighing the limited buying power of juvenile viewers against the large and relatively affluent audiences for daytime soap operas, situation comedies and game shows, the networks have come to reserve the bulk of their

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child-targeted broadcasting for Saturday morning cartoon marathons. They supplement that fare with occasional "after school specials," many of which have been widely applauded. The networks and their affiliates do not present these shows on any regular basis and do not promote them extensively in advance.

The public broadcasting system, by contrast, can boast of showing six hours of children's programming every weekday and four hours more on Sunday. In fact, however, most of these hours—including all the Sunday shows—are repeats. Only one hundred and thirty "Sesame Street" programs are new each year. Every weekday for twenty-six weeks children can see the same "Sesame Street" hour twice, and then for the next six months, see those shows rebroadcast. No "Electric Company" program is less than seven years old. The shows were made in 1975 and 1976, but not since. The original sixty-five programs of "3-2-1 Contact" have been in reruns for three years, although forty new half hours of this science series were produced in 1983.

Of the other programs distributed by PBS for children, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" had ten new half-hour shows for 1983. Most of this material has been broadcast repeatedly over the last fifteen years. "Reading Rainbow," a new program for six to nine year olds, began its life in 1983 with only enough resources to present shows in July and August. While there are new young viewers every year for this educational fare, repetition is making its variety stale, and so fast does the world change that repeated material quickly begins to acquire a dated look. Cultural dissonances, if not anachronisms, rapidly develop.

Cable television boasts two channels primarily oriented toward children. Although neither Nickelodeon nor the Disney Channel claim to be extensively educational, both pro-

vide welcome diversity for the child viewer. Unfortunately, the reach of these programs is much less than those on either commercial broadcasting or public broadcasting simply because at present only about a third of American households are wired for cable.

Nickelodeon broadcasts fourteen hours of programs a day, seven days a week, for children in various audience groupings from preschool through teenage. Nickelodeon, a Warner Amex satellite entertainment company channel, is carried by some two thousand nine hundred cable systems to about fourteen million subscribers in all fifty states. Most of the Nickelodeon shows are exclusive to Nickelodeon, but much of the daily fare consists of reruns of already broadcast Nickelodeon shows.

The advent of the Disney Channel in April 1983 brings subscribers willing to pay extra fees, as for Home Box Office, another sixteen hours a day of children's programming. The Disney Channel is carried by about nine hundred and fifty cable affiliates in all fifty states to more than three hundred and fifty thousand subscribers. Much of the programming on the Disney Channel consists of feature films and material from the Disney Library. About forty percent of the programming is original, including twelve series and the first Disney movie created exclusively for the Disney Channel.

Economic reality—the limited economic value of young viewers for the commercial networks, the limited importance of the young viewer as a supporter of public broadcasting or a donor to stations, and the limited audience for cable—means that what children watch on television is determined not by what they enjoy nor in any significant way by their educational needs. Although "quality" or "purposive" children's fare is available, the amount and scope of it are restricted. In the after school hours when children are most drawn to their home sets, they are not the viewers that most broadcasters seek to reach.

International Comparisons

The failure of broadcasting in the United States to meet the cultural and educational needs of children is well documented. The number of children's programs and the amount of money spent on them are far smaller than is justified by the size of audience and hours viewed. There are too few programs of all kinds—too few quality programs, too few broadcasts of the classics, too few educational programs. Too little money is spent by every measure—especially the amount of money spent on children's television programming compared to expenditures for other television fare or advertising. This is not true in other countries.

In England, for example, the BBC's two channels present a combined total of eight hundred and forty hours of children's programs each year, only a quarter of which consists of repeats. United States public television, by contrast, has carried no more than one hundred and fifty new program hours for children in any recent year. There are now no regularly scheduled daily series for children on any of our commercial networks. A British child growing up on the BBC's children's offering regularly encounters an impressive range of new information and ideas. At each distinctive stage in their children's development, from preschool to the age of early elementary school and later into the preteen and early teen years, there is available in Britain a regularly scheduled and renewed offering of television geared to each age group's specific and changing interests and educational needs. A full 12.5 percent of the BBC's broadcast schedule is devoted to children. Not only the BBC, but also ITV, its commercial counterpart, regularly turn out documentaries, news, drama, light enter-

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This segment about the Tianjin kite makers, from I.T.T.'s "Big Blue Marble," was the first show ever filmed in China by a non-Chinese children's television series. "Big Blue Marble," although it is no longer aired in the U.S., is shown in over 70 countries around the world.

tainment, magazine series and arts and educational programming for children.

Sweden allocates twelve percent of all television broadcast time to children's programs. Japan, which equips ninety-five percent of its nursery schools with television sets, strives to give children a full sampling of programs geared to them, a diversity comparable to that of the programs shown to adult audiences. In Japan educational television is carefully coordinated with classroom learning to support what goes on inside the schools. Indeed, these three countries, Great Britain, Sweden and Japan, even offer frequent special programs for adults about children, their nature and needs.

A National Policy for Telecommunications and Education

The facts are clear. The United States is in the midst of a long-term educational crisis. Our children are not receiving the education they need in order to live productive, satisfying lives. Our schools have been asked to do more than they can do and need long-term change and improvement. Television is in almost every American home. It can be an extremely effective teacher and a constructive element in children's lives. It is also remarkably cost effective. Despite this, the United States is failing to make full and effective use of television as an educational tool. This failure is particularly stark when our small effort is contrasted with almost any other industrial country outside the Soviet bloc. We must recognize that in this technological age there can be no effective education policy without an effective and coordinated telecommunications policy. Many knowledgeable people, perhaps most, would agree that a sensible set of objectives for realizing the educational potential of television might include the following:

- *Availability:* programs directed at children at the hours children watch television.
- *Diversity:* a range of content, style and subject matter as broad as a child's curiosity and needs.
- *Selectivity:* programs that use television for purposes it meets better or more efficiently than other forces influencing children.
- *Focus:* different programs for children of different ages.
- *Innovation:* programs that try concepts and tasks not yet extensively explored.

We must find ways to attain these objectives and implement an effective policy. We must acknowledge that commercial broadcasting, public broadcasting and cable television all have responsibilities and all have limitations. The public interest will only be effectively served if all the distributors of broadcasting share appropriately in the responsibility to provide effective educational television programming for children. Cable television, although having great promise for the distribution of programming to specialized audiences, cannot offer in the near future the availability we seek. Commercial television, governed by a stringent economic system, will not provide the necessary focus on so powerless a fraction of the overall buying public, nor innovate to the desired degree for the child minority unless public obligations are set for it, or inducements provided. Public television lacks the funds necessary to pay for the children's programming it would like to present and has been reluctant to enlarge its mission for the child audience.

Questions, and a Necessary Debate

The limitations and difficulties faced by each of the main distributors of television lead to an agenda of questions that must be dealt with if we are to take advantage of America's neglected teacher. The questions can be simply put, they cannot be simply answered. Having agreed that we must do more to use television and must use it better, we can ask the right questions now and shape answers that will lead to action.

Following is a list of questions and subjects that must be pursued with the intent of reaching specific and immediate conclusions. Some are proposals already in the public domain; some are ideas discussed and discarded in the past. The range is meant to be provocative:

Commercial Television

- Does the drive to remove restrictions on commercial broadcasters mean that all regulation has come to an end? Is some regulation appropriate when it is clear that market forces will not provide service to children—a heavy television viewing audience and one that needs to be particularly served in the national interest? What new directions in regulation might be taken?
- Should networks, their affiliates and their advertisers be taxed specifically to fund children's programs, whether they broadcast them or not?

Public Television

- What is the degree of public television's responsibility to the child audience? Should public television be specifically required to devote a portion of its day to educational programming for children?
- At a time when Federal funding for public broadcasting is declining, should funds be earmarked for children's programming?

Cable Television

- How can steps be taken now to assure that channel space will be available in the future for the entertaining and educational children's programming that is believed necessary?
- If pay television is the answer to children's programming on cable television of the

future, how can the interests of poor audiences be protected?

Public Policy

- In the aftermath of the FCC's recent December 1983 action reducing broadcasters' obligations toward children,* would a temporary commission, a blue ribbon panel, as suggested by Commissioner Henry M. Rivera be useful in generating consensus on the needs of children's television and the means of meeting these needs?
- In Congressional consideration of FCC regulatory policy, is it appropriate to pursue the special subject of children's television?

Public Funding

- Where should the increased money necessary for improved children's programming come from? Senator John Heinz has advocated granting tax credits to corporations—involved in broadcasting or not—to stimulate gifts by them to children's television productions. European countries generate public funds for public television through direct taxes (fees) on television set owners. Some Americans have suggested exploring ways to put commercial announcements on public television, an idea with which thirteen PBS stations have experimented. Might it be possible to link advertising directed to children directly with programming for children?
- How much money is needed?
- What agency or agencies should control the flow of Federal funds? Would an Endowment for Children's Television be a responsive, cost effective and responsible manager of public funds supplementing the activities of the Department of Education, the National Science Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting?
- Who should get the money? What criteria

*The FCC said that broadcasters face the obligation to meet the needs of children, but it left to the licensee the discretion of how to interpret and meet those needs.

in terms of experience, concentration of talent and imagination, management and promotional ability should be applied to potential grantees? Should funds be available to both commercial and noncommercial production agencies? How much must production be planned and centralized to be valuable in terms of overall educational effect, entertainment and cost?

The public debate on children's television has been lengthy, but it has not been well coordinated and has not led to any policy. To the extent that we are now able to address these questions and agree upon them, we will position ourselves to end the debate and develop a specific policy to guide future action.

Even now the broad outlines of a new national policy for telecommunications and education can be suggested:

- Using all present available means of broadcasting, both commercial and noncommercial, ways should be found to encourage the production and broadcast of more programming that is both educational and entertaining. This programming should be designed to impart skills and general knowledge, and to motivate children to achieve educational goals.
- In order to do this, increased and consistent funding will be necessary. The amount of money that is required is trivial in comparison to general educational expenditures, but it needs to be applied wisely and consistently if the long-term effects we desire are to be achieved. Realistically, the Federal government is the only possible source for this needed money. It is pointless to look to the private sector. The record clearly shows that sufficient private funds will not be forthcoming.
- Looking to the future, steps need to be taken immediately to guarantee access in the new distribution technologies for children's programming that is purposive, educational, informative and entertaining. Ways should be found now to ensure that in future years children's programming will not be crowded out of cable television, direct broadcast satellite or other technologies because adult and other specialized programming is more economically rewarding.
- Steps need to be taken to develop and support institutions within education and within the television community that can provide the programming needed both today and in the future.

Adopting policies such as these would enable the United States to achieve a set of goals similar to those that England, Sweden and Japan have set for themselves. These countries have recognized the educational potential of television and the public interest to be served by it. So far, we have not. The commanding impetus for devising a national policy for telecommunications and education comes from attention to the public interest, the future of our nation. Given the technological means we have developed, it would be an enormous failure of will and leadership if we did not use these resources to supplement schoolroom learning and assist future citizens to lead more satisfying and productive lives.

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I wish to thank the following people for their help in the preparation of this essay: Alfred Friendly, Jr. of Washington, D.C., Sarah Henry of the Markle Foundation, Gerald Lesser of Harvard University and the Children's Television Workshop, Edward Palmer of the Children's Television Workshop, John P. Robinson of the Survey Research Center of the University of Maryland, and Eli Rubinstein of the University of North Carolina School of Journalism.

12 The Markle Foundation

History of the Foundation

The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation was established in 1927 "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. . . and the general good of mankind." It was given a broad charter which permits a great deal of freedom in the choice of program. Less than a decade after its establishment, however, the Directors determined that the available funds could be used to best advantage if a major portion was concentrated in one area. This has continued to be the Foundation's policy.

Between 1927 and 1969 the Markle Foundation had three major programs. The first was in the field of social welfare. The second program began in 1936 and concentrated on research projects in the medical sciences. These projects were supported through small grants-in-aid, a device relatively new to philanthropy when the program began.

In 1947 a survey of medical school faculties revealed a shortage of teachers, administrators, and investigators. The goal of the Foundation's third program, one of grants to Scholars in Academic Medicine, was to improve this situation by providing recognition, financial support, and a measure of security for promising young men and women planning careers in academic medicine.

In 1969 the Directors decided to supplant the Scholars program and inaugurated the current program focused on mass communications.

Current Program

The purpose of the Foundation's program is the improvement of all media including services growing out of new technologies for the processing and transfer of information. The media have an increasingly important role to play in modern society. They provide education and information, shaping attitudes and opportunities as they influence our views of ourselves and the world.

A bewildering variety of new communication and information services are being introduced and planned. Television, film, radio, print and the telephone are becoming inseparably connected by the technology of data transmission and linked with computers.

The Foundation pursues its goals through support of: research on the role of mass communications in society; analysis of issues of public policy and public interest; projects that improve the performance of professionals involved in the mass communications services; and activities that enrich the quality of media. The Foundation has a general interest in all aspects of the media and related services and plans to support a wide range of efforts to improve them.

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