

TELEVISION AND OPINION

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TELEVISION is the best medium yet discovered for selling goods. That is the opinion of practical men in the United States, the home of commercial television, and it can be backed up by an array of facts and figures showing how the enormous sums of money spent on television advertising justify themselves in the eyes of those whose business it is to sell mass-produced goods.

The same factors that enable television to sell goods enables it also to sell ideas, provided that, like the goods, they are suitable for a mass public. Television is probably not the best medium for spreading original ideas, any more than it is the best medium for selling first editions or vintage port or thoroughbred sires or any other commodity that can be bought only by the few. But for the sort of vague general ideas that make up most people's everyday thinking, for the habits of thought and standards of value that influence the ordinary man's life, television has advantages over and above the other forms of mass-communication—print, cinema, radio—and it has access to people who are rarely touched by the still older influence of platform, stage, and pulpit.

Not so long ago, most people in civilized countries viewed the world through the medium of the popular newspaper and the cheap book. Later, this medium was largely displaced by the radio and the films. Now television is showing its power to replace them all as the universal oracle, the social law-giver, the norm-setter, the mirror in which you can see life as it ought to be and as you come to think it is.

Television is in itself more vivid than the printed word; its impact is more continuous than that of the films, and it has the advantage of coming into the home. That advantage it shares with sound radio, but as compared with the radio it has the incomparable advantage of adding sight to sound. For a generation mankind seemed to be settling to the unnatural accomplishment of apprehending things with the ear that were meant for the eye, but at the coming of television it is gladly reverting to a form of communication one degree more natural, though still artificial enough.

These advantages, manifest ever since television was first demonstrated, are no longer a matter of theoretical belief. Britain and America, where television has made its chief impact on a mass audience, can already show countless instances of the influence that it can exert. The most spectacular are, of course, in the field of personalities. From politicians to puppets, the television celebrity has the shortest road to national popularity. But it is worth remembering that among the outstanding beneficiaries of television popularity, along with the politicians and puppets and performers of all kinds, are the preachers. In America, Mgr Fulton Sheen has blazed the trail and won a following far outside the ranks of Catholics. The disquieting thought is that the trail is open for anybody to follow, and the arts of personality and persuasiveness that have made him so popular may succeed equally with other preachers who have a very different message to preach.

These are concrete examples; harder to detect, but more important in the long run, is the power of domestic television to affect habits of thought and standards of value and so influence the ordinary man in his ordinary life. And here we have to look aside from the educational and cultural programmes, the occasional religious broadcasts, and consider the run of television programmes that the viewing family can see every night. The first televised High Mass may be an inspiration to many viewers, and an event to mark in the log of television's achievements, but a far more constant influence is being exerted by the routine entertainment programmes, which are seldom credited with having any influence at all.

The modern approach to entertainment, at least in the English-speaking countries, is essentially uncritical; the mass audience accepts mass entertainment as something coming from above, and accepts the world it sees there as a real and desirable world, some of whose features can be imitated in the everyday world that lies on this side of the television screen. The manners and fashions seen on television are copied as are the manners and fashions seen on the films. It is not only that little boys who see a succession of shootings and sluggings on their television programmes form the ambition to shoot and slug when they grow up, and meanwhile copy their heroes in a small way in the backyard. Personally I suspect that too much has been made of this

feature of American television, which incidentally is not without its parallels in England too, for little boys seem always to have had an appetite for violence, and the television screen has only carried on the function that the penny dreadfuls performed to the best of their ability in their time.

The same process is going on uncensored in the lives of their elders. A constant flow of television entertainment all moving in the same direction can effect the uncritical audience to the point of imitation. If blondes are consistently shown on television as more desirable than brunettes, girls who watch television will want to go blonde. If plunging necklines and crew cuts are fashionable on television, they may easily become fashionable in the local dance-hall. If it is the regular thing for television heroes to cheat and swindle, for television heroines to play off one man against another, for wives to trick their husbands and children to defy their parents, these patterns of behaviour will be copied more or less by the most suggestible section of the audience that sees them not once or twice a week in the escapist surroundings of the cinema, but every day and every night in the normal surroundings of the home.

It is too easy to denounce television as a mere menace because it has such dangerous power. Its one inherent weakness is that it brings ready-made entertainment to a passive audience, and in that it is neither new nor unique. It can bring information, education, a knowledge of the big world beyond the little world in which each viewer has to live; bring new ideas, open new horizons, suggest new pursuits. In the field of opinion, it can provide material for judgment that the viewer could not provide for himself, and start him thinking about things that might never have interested him if they had reached him in any other way.

Like every other medium of communication, television must be judged by its content, and it is easy to say that if a country's standards are high, its television programmes will live up to them. But at this point intrudes the disturbing analogy of the films.

Like television, the cinema is a medium of communication capable of bringing great benefits; it can convey information, promote culture, religion, and education, transmit stimulating ideas. There are films that do all these things. But the common run of films, the films that are seen twice a week by millions of people in English-speaking countries, entertain their audiences

without elevating them. On the contrary, they tend on the whole to familiarise them with false values and give them a trivial, sordid, or sentimental view of life.

The public that has hitherto been visiting the cinema twice a week is the public that is now most open to the influence of television every night in the home. Is there reason to hope that they will get a better influence from one screen than from the other, whatever the standards of the country may be?

It is not entirely a question of who controls the television service; it is more important to know who provides the programmes that it shows. The television machine is exigent, extortionate, voracious. Programmes must be fed into it in enormous numbers to satisfy expectations based on the constant flow of sound broadcasting. Television is expected to provide a much greater bulk of entertainment than even the film industry, and the same factors that have made the production of films in English a centralized industry seem likely to make the production of television entertainment in English similarly centralized, whether in Hollywood or elsewhere.

So far television in Britain has been in the hands of the B.B.C., and the programmes have contained a considerable proportion of enlightenment, with some items that can have appealed only to a discriminating minority but a good many that were likely to raise the taste of the many who would view them. Even so, the effect of the programmes as a whole has been open to criticism. The charge can be made, and has been made, that the bulk of entertainment programmes likely to be viewed by the mass audience has had a strong element of triviality, marked by unquestioning acceptance of popular values, significant among which is the tendency to glorify everything to do with the films.

Now the B.B.C. has announced plans for extending its own programme hours, and the Government has decided that it is also to have competition from an independent service. That means more programmes, more hours on the air, more and more demands from the exigent machine. Entertainment must be churned out at an even higher rate than before. The constant vacuum in the British cinema, which sucked in a rapid flow of American films, is likely to be paralleled by a constant vacuum in British television, which will have to be filled by mass-production from some source.

Britain is not alone in facing this problem. It confronts all the countries in Europe that are now starting television or making plans to start it. Some hope to solve it by exchange of programmes between different countries, in spite of all the obstacles that lie in the way; it is generally realised that few countries can hope to fill the whole of their programme time from their own resources. All of them plan to depend to a large extent on ready-made films. But whereas most countries have entrusted their television services to responsible bodies that are not expected to make profits, the making of films is still in the hands of companies whose driving force is profit, and whose basis of calculation has always been the entertainment of the many in as many countries as their films can reach.

Of course, it is not the source of the entertainment that matters, but its nature, the standards that it reflects and the ideas that it imparts. For it does impart ideas; the contemporary mass audience forms its ideas on the entertainment that it receives as much as on any of the established sources of information, more than on the acknowledged sources of education. The film or the television programme is often so much more vivid, more compelling, more memorable, and above all more acceptable to the majority, than anything that can be learnt in the library, in the school, or from the sermon in church.

If the ideas implicit in the entertainment programmes are trivial and materialistic, it will be a stern chase for ideas derived from any other source to catch up with them. On the other hand, if any way can be found of infusing entertainment programmes with worthy ideas, they can reinforce the work of writers, teachers, and preachers, and maybe have more influence than any of them in the modern world.

So the influence of television on opinion is not a matter to be judged on the superficial tests. The lists of improving programmes, the correspondence received after a religious ceremony has been televised, the nation-wide celebrity of Mgr Fulton Sheen, do not tell the whole story or even the most important part of it. Behind all the conscious betterment lies the unintentional and often unacknowledged effect of the ceaseless flow of entertainment on the television screen, the daily and nightly projection of what the entertainment interests think to be a desirable world, which is what the unthinking, passive public accepts as the sort of world that it too ought to desire.