The First Curriculum:  
Comparing School and Television

by Neil Postman

Mr. Postman offers a sophisticated analysis of today’s competing learning systems: the schools and TV. There’s no doubt now that TV is the First Curriculum; educators must appreciate the formidable challenge it presents.

Everybody (except TV’s executives) seems to know that television is exerting a profound influence on our youth, although we are not always clear as to what it is. I propose to suggest the nature of that influence, and to begin doing so by comparing television with another and older medium of communication, school.

School is one of our few remaining information systems firmly organized around pre-electronic patterns of communication. School is old times and old biases. For that reason, it is more valuable to us than most people realize, but, in any case, it provides a clear contrast to the newer system of perception and thought that television represents. By putting television and school side by side, we can see where we are going and what we are leaving, which is exactly what we need to know.

If a traditional school exerts influences that make visible and modify the biases of new media, then it is obviously an institution to be aggressively preserved. This does not mean that such an institution cannot be improved, although not necessarily by making it more modern. In fact, one way to improve school is by preventing it from becoming “modern.” And this does not mean going “back to the basics.” In the competition between the biases of school and the biases of television, I have no doubt that the biases of the latter will prevail. This can safely be predicted not only because television is newer and more powerful but because its effects are continuously reinforced by other media of communication, including records, tapes, radio, photography, and film.

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The first point to be made about television and school is to observe that each of them is a curriculum. A curriculum, as commonly defined, is a course of study whose purpose is to train or cultivate both mind and character. Schools are generally acknowledged to have curricula, although typically it is not acknowledged that they are curricula. But of course they are. Everything about a school has an effect — intentional or not — on the shaping of the young, and a “course study” surely includes all the conditions under which learning takes place. Sometimes these “conditions” are referred to as the “hidden curriculum,” although it is not clear from whom it is supposed to be hidden. The total school environment is the most visible thing about school and is certainly what is most remembered about school by everybody in later years.

Television is not usually acknowledged either to have a curriculum or to be one, which is probably why parents do not pay as much attention to the television education of their children as they do to their school education. Many parents, as well as educators, seem to believe that television is an “entertainment medium,” by which they mean to imply that little of enduring value is either taught by or learned from it.

But all of this can be seen more clearly if we simply define a curriculum as a specially constructed information system whose purpose, in its totality, is to influence, teach, train, or cultivate the mind and character of our youth. By this definition, television and school not only have curricula but are curricula; that is, they are total learning systems. Each has a special way of organizing time and space; their messages are encoded in special forms and moved at different rates of speed; each has its special way of defining knowledge, its special assumptions about the learning process, and its own special requirements concerning how one must attend to what is happening. Moreover, each has a characteristic subject matter, ambience, and style, all of which reflect the unique context within which one experiences what is going on. And, though their effects are strikingly different, each has as its purpose the control of our young. Viewed in this way, television is not only a curriculum but constitutes the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States. That is why I call it the First Curriculum. School is the second.

The first task of a curriculum is to engage the attention of its students for a certain period of time. Thus there are two questions to be addressed: How much time? How to get their attention? If we assume a child will go to school for 13 years — say, starting in kindergarten and ending with high school — a typical American child will be in the presence of a school curriculum 2,340 days, or about 11,500 hours. There are only two activities that occupy more of a youngster’s time during those years: sleeping and attending to television.

Studies of TV viewing are far from definitive, but a fair estimate is that from age 3 to 18 an American child watches TV for approximately 15,000 hours. That is 30% more time than he is engaged at school, a very significant difference. If we add to the 15,000 hours of TV viewing the time occupied by radio and record listening, as well as movie-going, we come up with a figure very close to 20,000 hours of exposure to an electronic media curriculum — almost double the amount of time spent in school.

And so the television curriculum is first in the time given to it by students, and it is also first in their hearts, primarily because of the manner in which the two curricula command attention. Both the school and the TV curricula use compulsion: the school directly through

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legal means, television indirectly through psychological means. If we ask what the roots of these different types of compulsions are, we arrive at some interesting answers. For instance, the school curriculum includes a content or subject matter selected, in principle, for its significant cultural or intellectual value. But its content may or may not be of interest to the student — in fact, traditionally is not — thus requiring legal force to compel attendance to it. Moreover, there is also a social and occupational basis to the compulsions of school. One must attend in order to get someplace in life, especially if that place is college or a professional school. School is one step in a hierarchical structure that leads to heavenly and lucrative occupations — or so it is generally believed. If compulsory education laws were repealed in every state, it would be fascinating to see who would continue to go to school and who would not, and what accommodations, if any, business and the professions would make.

The television curriculum is based on an entirely different principle of compulsion. Whereas the school curriculum compels attention through law and even occupational necessity, the TV curriculum requires no such external controls. Television is an attention-centered curriculum. In one sense it has no goal other than keeping the attention of its students. Unlike the school, which selects its subject matter first and then tries to devise methods to attract interest in it, television first selects ways to attract interest and allows content to be shaped accordingly. This is not to say that the content of the school curriculum is always significant or that the content of television is always trivial; only that, in the first instance, attention is subservient to content, and, in the second, content is wholly subservient to attention.

In the school curriculum, if the student repeatedly does not pay attention, the teacher may remove him from class. In the TV curriculum, if the student repeatedly does not pay attention, the teacher is removed from class.

This exceedingly important fact means that the television curriculum need not concern itself with penalties. Most children, at least beyond a certain age, attend school largely to avoid the penalties for not doing so, whether the source be their parents, the law, or the future. School is, to a considerable extent, a penalty-laden curriculum. Not television. There is no penalty for not attending to one's TV lessons and none is needed. This fact surrounds the experience of television attendance with a benign psychological ambience that the school can never achieve.

One must also note that the TV curriculum has an additional advantage in gaining attention through what may be called the compulsions of proximity and continuousness; its lessons are easily accessible and, for all practical purposes, endless. In addition, the information in each curriculum is codified in different fashions.

School is essentially language-centered. All language is a digital form of information. (By digital, I mean that meanings are arbitrary, abstract, and segmental. Analogic forms of information, on the other hand — photographs, for instance — have an intrinsic relationship to what they signify and are not decomposable into small units of meaning.) In addition to its being arbitrary, abstract, and segmental, language has several other characteristics that distinguish it from analogues, two of which are especially important. The first is that words do not call to mind specific referents. A word does not refer to a specific thing so much as it refers to a category of things; that is, words are concepts. When I say or write the word man, you do not know which man. I have brought to your mind a concept of a man, a composite of possibilities. To be sure, I could use more words to give you a more specific idea. But it is not possible, through language, to achieve a level of specificity that would make it unnecessary for you to have an idea about the words. Descriptive words such as the adjectives in "a tall, dark, handsome man" merely limit the concept of "man" by introducing additional concepts. As long as words are being used, we are always at a considerable remove from reality, for words are not representations of reality. They are representations of ideas about reality.

That is why (and this is the second point) all language is paraphrasable. By using different words, one can always approximate what someone else has said. If this were not so, there could be no such thing as translation. Translation can occur because an idea, unlike a picture, can be represented in various ways. Words have synonyms. Pictures do not. Analogic forms, such as pictures, are not ideas; nor are they paraphrasable. A picture must be experienced to be experienced. This is what people mean when they say, "You have to see it," or "You should have been there." They mean that the symbolic event must be directly apprehended in the form in which it exists. There is no translation of it. There is no idea of it. If you attempt to use a different form to convey the meaning, you will change the meaning. Ten thousand words or a million will not translate into the picture. Words are of a different order of abstraction, requiring an entirely different mode of intellectual activity.

The image — concrete, unique, non-paraphrasable — versus the word — abstract, conceptual, translatable. This is one of several conflicts between TV and school, and perhaps the most important. Obviously, the curriculum of television is essentially imagistic, that is, picture-centered. Its teaching style is therefore almost wholly narrative. To put it simply, the content of the TV curriculum consists of picture stories. The school curriculum, on the other hand, tends to be word- or concept-centered, and its teaching style is exposition. The school curriculum — at least in its content — consists of abstract propositions: linguistic statements of which we may say they are true or false, verifiable or not, logical or confused.

This is another way of saying that the TV curriculum does its work in analogic symbols that appeal directly to emotional and largely unreflective response, while the school curriculum, relying heavily on digital symbolism, requires sophisticated cognitive processing. It is not true, as so many have insisted, that watching TV is a passive experience. Anyone who has observed children watching television will know how foolish that statement is. In watching TV, children have their emotions fully engaged. It is their capacity for abstraction that is quiescent. In school the situation is apt to be reversed: Children are required, in principle, to understand and consider what is said, expected to be able to paraphrase, translate, and reformulate what is said, which is why tests are so easy to give in school. In experiencing TV you are required to feel what is seen, which is why there can be no paraphrase and no meaningful test.

This difference between symbols that
demand conceptualization and reflection and symbols that evoke feeling has many
implications, one of the most important being that the content of the TV cur-
riculum is irrefutable. You can dispute it but you cannot disagree with it. There
is no way to refute Donny and Marie, or an Ajax commercial. The semiotic form
of the TV curriculum is not in propositional form, does not deal in the sort of informa-
tion that the symbols of the school cur-
riculum do. Images and sentences are
neither processed by the brain nor evaluated by the intelligence in the same
way. They do different things and require
different responses. The words true and
false come out of an entirely different
universe of symbolism. Propositions are
ture or false; pictures are not.

I am not ridiculing television but merely
describing an important bias of the
form of the medium. Television is not to
be faulted because it consists of pictures.
To fault television is like faulting an English
sentence for having a subject and predi-
cate. Nor can the television curriculum be
faulted for its moralistic and value-laden
bias. That is its nature. Narratives of any
kind — in this case, picture stories — are
inevitably aphoristic and metaphorical.
Exposition, on the other hand, works
through definition, assertion, explication,
and analysis — an ensemble which by con-
trast with the form of narration is relative-
ly value-neutral.

Let me put it this way: Consider the
case of two professors. The first, Pro-
fessor Neil Postman, talks about his con-
ception of education in his classes.
He defines what it is and how it works.
Through the medium of English sen-
tences, he uses history, logic, and research
to formulate, explain, and justify his
ideas. His ideas are, of course, refutable
by counterargument, which is the
nature of exposition. One may say that there
is value and even moral purpose in his goals.
But he does not, and can not, attach a
moral implication to every word and fact
and proposition. To do that would be to
talk like Jesus: that is, to use language
parabolically.

On the other hand, consider Professor
Gabe Kaplan of “Welcome Back, Kot-
ter.” Professor Kaplan is a teacher, too.
But he does not work with facts, proposi-
tions, generalizations, or anything that is
refutable. Like Jesus, he works almost
wholly in parables. Of course, unlike
Jesus, his parables are constructed not in
language, which always contains a con-
ceptual base, but in pictures. For though
human speech is heard on television, it is
the picture that always contains the most
important meanings. Above all, people
watch television. And so Kotter’s parables
are invariably encoded in dynamic, con-
tinuously shifting imagery. And like all
parables they are particularizations of a
way of life, or a style of human relations,
or a method of solving problems.
“Charlie’s Angels” and “M*A*S*H” are
similarly parabolistic, and so is a commer-
cial for United Airlines. That you may not
like the drift of these parables is another
matter. Remember that the Pharisees felt
the same way about Jesus’ parables but in
the long run were powerless against them.

It comes down to this: Because the
school curriculum’s primary form of in-
formation is language, its style of teaching
is expository. And because its style of
teaching is expository, it concerns itself
with facts and arguments. And because of
that, it cannot help (even when its
teaching is done badly) promoting con-
cepts of knowledge and ways of knowing that
stress the importance of detachment,
objectivity, analysis, and criticism. In a
sentence, the school curriculum is both
rationalistic and secular in its outlook.

Television is both aesthetic and (at
least) quasi-religious. Because its primary
form of information is the image, its style
of teaching is narration. And because of
that, it is concerned with showing con-
crete people and situations toward which
one responds by either accepting or reject-
ing them on emotional grounds. Televi-
sion teaches you to know through what
you see and feel. Its epistemology begins
and largely ends in the viscera. As
blasphemous as it may seem, television has
something of the power we associate
with religious communication, at least in
the sense that it relies heavily on moral
teachings resting on an emotional base.

These differences in the form in which
each curriculum codifies its information
— the difference between pictures and
words, analogic and digital symbols, nar-
rative and expository styles, parables
and arguments — account for the fact
that the school curriculum is hierarchical,
rigidly graded, and based on the principle
of the prerequisite, whereas the TV cur-
riculum is almost totally undifferentiated.

Concepts, generalizations, verbal knowl-
edge — reasoning itself — are hierarchical
in nature. There is a structure to ideas.
They are built one upon another, and one
must be able to comprehend lower orders
of concepts before comprehending those
of greater complexity. That is almost the
whole reason for prerequisites in school.

But I doubt if there is a hierarchy
either of imagery or feeling. If there is, it
is of such subtlety that no one has yet been
able to organize it into graded levels. In
any case, the TV curriculum has not found
it necessary to do so. TV presents
its subject matter whole, without regard
to age, sex, level of maturity, or educa-
tion. There are no prerequisites for watch-
ing television — not for watching “La-
verne and Shirley” or for watching
Jacques Cousteau. This gives the TV cur-
riculum a sense of completeness that can-
not exist in a curriculum based on orders
of complexity.

In the school curriculum, there is
always more to know, another concept or
refinement of a skill to be learned. In the
TV curriculum, one knows, or at least
feels, everything at once. This is one
reason why you can miss one or several
at a time. Professor Gabe Kaplan’s lessons
without having anything to “make up.” But if
you miss one of Professor Postman’s lessons,
you fall behind. In the TV curriculum,
there is no such thing as “falling behind.”
All lessons are on the same plane. There is
nothing to be retarded and nothing to be
developed.

This fact is one of the sources of
TV’s enormous capacity to satisfy.
Within the TV curriculum there is no
deferral of gratification. Perhaps the most
powerful bias of television is its emphasis
on immediate gratification, for television
has no need to put its learners on “hold”
with a view toward later intellectual or

“Says here the average child watches four to five hours of TV a day. Somewhere out there are two kids who don’t watch any.”

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emotional satisfaction. TV does not require you to remember or anticipate anything. In fact, the TV curriculum has achieved, in an unexpected and upside-down way, what so many educators have always hoped for: learning for its own sake. Whereas the school curriculum promises future intellectual rewards for learning its lessons, the TV curriculum promises no rewards whatsoever. Attending to it is its own reward. In a nonhierarchical, analogic information system based on immediate emotional response, there is no future, or sense of continuity, or need for preparation. The pleasure of total comprehension and involvement is immediately accessible.

This dimension of immediacy is reinforced in many ways on television, particularly in the length of its lessons. The learning modules of the TV curriculum are extremely short and compact: Commercials run anywhere from 10 to 60 seconds; what are called "programs" run from 30 to 60 minutes but are always sequenced in eight- to 10-minute modules.

The commercials are an especially important component of the TV curriculum because between the ages of 5 and 18 a youngster will see approximately 675,000 commercials, at the rate of about 1,000 per week. This makes the television commercial the most voluminous information source in the education of youth. And this means that we can assume that our youth are being conditioned to intense concentration for short periods of time and deconditioned, so to speak, to sustained concentration.

Moreover (and this is important), television commercials, which are subject to easy ridicule by those who know little about information environments, are almost never about anything trivial, especially from the point of view of youth. Mouthwash commercials are not about bad breath. They are about the need for social acceptance and, frequently, about the need to share the values of a peer group. An automobile commercial may be about one's need for autonomy or social status, a toilet paper commercial about one's fear of nature.

Television commercials are about products only in the sense that the story of Jonah is about the anatomy of whales. To miss this point is to miss much of what the television curriculum sets out to do, for, especially in commercials, it teaches, by parable, that serious human worries are resolvable through relatively simple means and that, therefore, the resolution of anything problematic is never far away. The lesson is almost the exact opposite of what schools are accustomed to assume about the nature and resolution of human problems.

In fact, the TV curriculum contradicts in another, hardly subtle way what traditional schools have always assumed. It is an axiomatic part of scholarship that all things have consequences and that our history is never irrelevant to our present or future. Even our traditional theology teaches that. We may overcome or re-proach our history but we cannot deny its existence. But TV's imagistic, present-oriented, time-compressed curriculum is nonsequential: that is, discontinuous. Hardly anything on television, however high its quality, has anything to do with anything else on television.

There is an almost overwhelming sense of incoherence to the TV curriculum. A school curriculum, even one that has not been well thought out, always tries to proceed from some organizing principle. It may be based on a hierarchy of concepts, as in mathematics. Or it may move chronologically from one point to another, as in history. Or it may be held together by some theme, as in literature. In television, however, there is no organizing principle. There is no chronology, or theme, or logical sequence. The world to which television is the window is presented as fragmented, unorganizable, without structure of any kind. Even to the extent that TV, in some sense, puts forward a theology, it is a theology without a moral center, without historical precedents, without general application.

Perhaps the most coherent content of the entire TV curriculum is a five-day weather forecast in which one is shown what a rainstorm in Texas on Monday has to do with a snowstorm in New York on Friday. The rest of the content consists of discrete and isolated events, images, and stories that have no implications very far beyond themselves and that certainly have no continuity. Whereas the content of the school may be likened at least in principle to a play in which there is a beginning, middle, and end, the content of TV is like a vaudeville show in which there are only acts. They are replaceable and reversible, time not being a dimension that is one's. And in some places it operates around the clock. Thus it is able to integrate itself into the student's life in a way that the school curriculum can never approach. Moreover, the TV curriculum is almost always experienced at home. There is no reason for it to assign homework. It is by its nature homework. And this fact leads to a striking paradox.

Whereas the school curriculum is community-centered — that is, learning takes place in the presence of others in something approximating a ritualized context — the TV curriculum is individual-centered. It is (so far, at least) the ultimate example of individualized instruction although not in the sense that the lessons are designed for particular individuals — rather in the sense that individuals learn in isolation. All the other TV students are invisible to the learner; they cannot intrude either their defects or virtues on his concentration.

The paradox lies in the fact that television is customarily thought of as a mass medium. But in one sense it is far less so than the school. For school is, if nothing else, a communal situation, a medium that demands a public gathering. Television is an individualizing medium. One experiences TV and responds to it in psychological as well as physical isolation from others. School teaches you to behave

"Television is an individualizing medium."

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Why can Ralph Nader appear on “Saturday Night Live” or Richard Nixon on “Laugh-In” without causing an acute sense of incongruity?

as a member of a group. Television teaches you to behave as an individual. In school, an individual is continuously required to modify his behavior to conform to the aims and needs of the group. To misbehave in school means, for the most part, to violate a group norm. But in attending to the TV curriculum, one may exhibit almost any kind of behavior. One is free to eat, to do homework, to knit, lie down, stand up, talk, read a magazine — do whatever seems to satisfy one’s own aims and needs.

Moreover, the bias toward individualistic response is enhanced by the “elective” nature of the TV curriculum. The learner can choose whatever lesson pleases him. There are no required courses, no major or minor subjects. One can drop any course in a second when interest wanes. A turn of the wrist is one’s “drop/add” slip. No group responsibility or consultation is required.

The effects of TV would appear at first to duplicate the effects of the printed book when it first intruded itself into Western culture. As Harold Innis has postulated, the book, which demands privacy and encourages individual choice and response, had the effect of splitting the individual off from a group learning context and thereby generated an irresistible urge to individualism.

This similarity between television and the book is, I believe, entirely superficial. In the first place, the book entered societies that were predominantly community-centered. It promoted individualism within the context of societies organized around and devoted to its opposite. In the case of America, television has entered a society already greatly committed to individualism. Thus it is quite possible that by vastly increasing isolated learning television encourages only idiosyncrasy and the attractions of anarchy.

Second, because books, even bad ones, are ultimately about ideas, they have the effect of encouraging the individualism of independent and critical thought. Books, as David Riesman once said, act as a kind of gunpowder of the mind. In this they can scarcely help themselves, for English sentences organized in linear sequence on a page have almost no interest beyond what they symbolize. They are not especially lovely to look at. They do not move around and dazzle the eye. They can do nothing but invite attention to their meaning, which in turn generates criticism of their meaning, and then the construction of alternatives to their meaning.

This is not, however, true for television. The TV image offers interesting and dynamic form, not interesting and dynamic ideological content. That is why viewers can watch the same program five and six times without boredom, for even the stories themselves are subordinate to the attractions of the individual image. One is drawn by the fascination of these images, especially images of familiar personalities. Even the content of TV news programs is almost wholly irrelevant to the viewer. Except in rare instances, we watch to see the teller of the news, not to hear what he tells. This is why Ralph Nader can appear on “Saturday Night Live” or Richard Nixon on “Laugh-In” without causing an acute case of incongruity. What they have to say is of no importance on TV. It is their image, not their words, to which we attend. Who would really be surprised if Anwar Sadat made a guest appearance on “Little House on the Prairie”? What difference would it make anyway?

We expect very few connections between the imagery of television and the world of ideas and issues. In a medium in which the image captures most attention, personality supersedes — in fact, all but oblatures — ideas and issues. That is why one becomes a celebrity by the mere fact of appearing on television. No prior accomplishment nor reason for being there is required. It is accomplishment enough to be on television. It is its own reason.

In such a situation, individualism takes on a wholly different aspect from its meaning in a book culture. The individualism of the book leads to the dominance of the mind. The individualism of TV leads to the dominance of personality.

Two other characteristics of the TV curriculum bear mentioning because they are in sharp contrast with the school curriculum. They are also in sharp contrast with each other, which makes them especially interesting. The first is that the TV curriculum is largely authoritarian; that is, its information moves in one direction. There is no way that television students can modify or control the speed, pace, form, quantity, content, or anything else of their lessons. No questions may be addressed to their instructor. No complaint may be lodged. No special arrangements can be requested. Even the “elective” nature of the TV curriculum, alluded to before, does not mitigate the absence of any feedback possibilities. To be sure, a student can turn off a lesson — let us say, “Happy Days” — and turn to another more to his liking — say, “Baretta” — but he remains entirely impotent to affect either the structure or content of the lesson.

School, of course, is not famous for its democratic structure. But even the harshest school critic will concede that the classroom is by no means a unidirectional system. If nothing else, misbehavior itself is a form of feedback, and no teacher can be indifferent to it. But except in the rarest instances (and I have never seen one), a teacher will permit questions, will ask for and even demand responses, will repeat and review according to need, will encourage students to exert influence on their lessons. Even when a teacher is asking “what-am-I-thinking” types of questions, the point is to produce output from students.

Output is not possible in the TV curriculum, at least not in the sense I mean it here. The TV curriculum provides only input, and this, incidentally, may have something to do with the increase in student misbehavior in school. When people are denied access to routes of response in one information system, they will frequently be outrageously expressive when they find themselves in a situation where response is both possible and permissible. The school curriculum, then, for all of its legendary demands for obedience and passivity, is far less authoritarian than the TV curriculum. It has, at least, an audience, meaning people who are capable of acting on the environment. TV, in this sense, has no audience.

At the same time, while the school curriculum tries to distribute knowledge in an orderly and authoritative way, the TV curriculum continuously undermines authority. Television is both authoritarian and contemptuous of authority at the same time. As Harold Innis points out, every new medium has the capability of breaking up “knowledge monopolies.” The phonetic alphabet broke the knowledge monopoly of the priests whose secrets were codified in complex ideographs. The printing press broke the knowledge monopoly of those few writers and readers who controlled the manu-
script culture. Television attacks the monopoly of the printed word.

In fact, by distributing information, albeit in pictures, to everyone in the culture simultaneously, TV threatens all systems that have a hierarchical structure. A hierarchy is a drama played by superiors, inferiors, and equals. Information is the means by which we assign people their role in the drama and, indeed, justify that role. In principle, those at the top have more information and more access to information than those at the bottom. That is essentially why they are at the top and the others at the bottom. Moreover, every hierarchy has a certain pattern of distributing information. For example, you cannot get into medical school until you have been to college, and to college until you have been to high school. This is what is called “prerequisites,” to which I alluded earlier. The concept of a prerequisite is based on the metaphor of constructing a building. The earliest information you get will provide the foundation. Then, in an orderly, sequential way, you will, by acquiring a measured and predetermined amount of information, move toward the top floor. This is an entirely rational way of proceeding — it is certainly the way of the school — except when there is a television antenna on the roof.

Television is the enemy of foundations and prerequisites, and is therefore hostile to the basis of traditional authority. TV turns hierarchies on their sides. By conveying information in nonhierarchical distribution patterns, it creates a deeply felt impression that there is no rational reason for tops and bottoms, or for secrets, or for knowledge monopolies. In such a situation everyone goes into business for himself. Or believes that he ought to. We move toward a culture of political, spiritual, and social entrepreneurs. It could be very dangerous, especially when the means by which traditional authority is undermined is, itself, exceedingly authoritarian.

Now, you may have the impression that I strongly disapprove of the TV curriculum. But this is not the case, and it is also beside the point. TV will not go away. In all likelihood, it will continue to increase its influence and prestige in our information environment. It is pointless to spend time or energy deploiring television, or even making proposals to “improve” it. Of course, the seriousness, maturity, and general quality of the content of its programs certainly can be improved. But the characteristics I am talking about are deeply embedded in the structure of television. They are an integral part of the environment that television creates. From this point of view, television cannot be improved. As I have described it, the TV curriculum has the following characteristics. It is:

- attention-centered
- nonpunitive
- affect-centered
- present-centered
- image-centered
- narration-centered
- moralistic
- nonanalytical
- nonhierarchical
- authoritarian
- contemptuous of authority
- continuous in time
- isolating in space
- discontinuous in content
- immediately and intrinsically gratifying

No amount of academic complaints or “responsible” calls for TV reform can change any of the above. TV is not a school, or a book, or any curriculum other than itself. It does what its structure makes it do, and it teaches as it must. The real pragmatic issue is not TV but its relationship to other systematic teachings in the information environment. The question is, To what extent can the biases of TV be balanced by the biases of other information systems, particularly the school? But before we get to that, we must first consider, in some careful way, what are likely to be the consequences of an unchallenged television education. What will its biases lead to? Without considering that, we cannot know what sorts of defenses to prepare.

The Drive to Convince Teachers of the Educational Value of Commercial TV

by Maya Pines

Are the networks and their willing accomplices taking advantage of educator gullibility and despair to gain new ratings advantages?

Since children spend so much time watching TV, they might as well learn something from it." With this argument, the TV networks, corporate advertisers, teachers unions, and even the federal government are putting considerable

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pressure on teachers to use TV in their classrooms or to assign it as homework. It sounds reasonable, and some of this advice is offered disinterestedly. But often there is a hidden agenda: Teachers are wooed because their word can bring in millions of additional viewers — students and their families. When a half million teachers followed a suggestion from the National Education Association (NEA) and told their students to watch "Roots: The Next Generation" last spring, for instance, "NEA's efforts . . . resulted in approximately 20 million students watching, discussing, and writing about one of the most ambitious and highly acclaimed television shows ever," ABC boasted in a full-page newspaper ad recently.

Nevertheless, a large number of teachers remain doubtful about the value of such efforts. They consider TV as their rival — a "thief of time," as University of Chicago psychologist Benjamin Bloom has put it. They want children to read books rather than watch TV, and they hate to compound the problem by assigning more TV shows as homework. Yet

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