Is Watching TV Passive, Uncreative or Addictive? Debunking Some Myths
by Kathy Pezdek

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VER the past few years I have made a hobby of collecting articles "documenting" the horrible effects of watching television on children. These are two of my favorites.

Mander, the author of Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (1978), introspected that, "After watching television, I'd always be aware of a kind of glowing inside my head: the images! They'd remain in there even after the set was off, like an aftertaste. Against my will, I'd find them returning to my awareness hours later" (p. 159).

But more than this, Sabin, writing in Today's Health (1972), a publication of the American Medical Association, tells us, "One needs only to watch a toddler sitting in front of a television set — drained face, motionless body — to realize the physiological and psychological depletion of the child. ...television assaulted young viewers with exhausting stimuli akin to the sounds, fears and tensions that have gradually killed prisoners in concentration camps" (p. 71).

And as if this were not enough, Doerken (1983), a teacher and the author of Classroom Combat: Teaching and Television, describes television as "constant psychic irritation of rampant consumerism" (p. 172) and claims that television effectively reduces reading scores, writing scores, and listening scores; alters brain waves; disrupts sleep patterns; and "pushes some people over the deep end," causing schizophrenia (p. 172).

Now don't misunderstand. I am a serious research psychologist investigating cognitive processing of television. My research has been funded by prestigious sources and published in highly regarded academic and popular publications. In short, I am a hard-nosed experimentalist who rarely makes a statement, any statement, without supporting data and appropriate control conditions. So why have I made a hobby of collecting fanatical statements documenting the horrors of television, the medium I have systematically studied for half of my professional career?

The answer is that I am fascinated by the aspect of human nature that causes all of us to split the world into halves — love and hate, safe and dangerous, good and evil. According to this framework, in order for something to be all good, something else has to be all bad. Democracy is good; Communism is bad. Republicans are good; Democrats are bad. Your kid is good; the neighborhood kid is bad. In regard to television, this view is simply that television is all bad and other alternatives — reading, family, play, radio — are all good.

The purpose of this piece is to consider three specific myths regarding cognitive processing of television and then debunk these myths by exposing some of the relevant research findings. My hope is that the reader will be left with a more critical view, or at least a more balanced view, of the strengths of the medium of television. Keep in mind that this article addresses the medium of television not the programming presented on the medium. Thus, I am not addressing issues such as the social lessons that children learn from programs on television. These are important problems, but are beyond the scope of this article. No attempt is made here to include a comprehensive literature review. My goal is simply to present some of the most convincing research findings that speak to each of these issues. The three myths that I will take on are the following:

Myth #1: Television is a passive medium; children passively absorb information presented on television — violence, sex, commercials, etc.

Myth #2: Television viewing decreases creativity in children.

Myth #3: Television viewing is an "addictive behavior."

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I will start with Myth #1, that television is a passive medium. We don't need to look far to find claims that "television is a passive activity" (Trelease, 1982) and "passive learning is easy...and characterized by a lack of resistance to what is presented — conditions which are all apparent while watching TV" (Doerken, 1983, p. 17). But what does it mean that television is "cognitively passive"?

We can conceptualize watching television as a series of information processing stages: we perceive information, attend to it, encode it, retain it in memory and later retrieve the information from memory. The view that watching television is a passive cognitive process suggests that memory and comprehension follow automatically from perception and attention to television. In other words, when we look at television, the information presented goes directly into memory without requiring conscious processing. If watching television is a passive activity then it would be expected that when children watch television, (a) they are looking at the television a great deal of the time, and (b) their looks back and forth, to and from television are random and unsystematically related to program content. According to this view then, "television is the direct opposite of reading" (Trelease, 1982).

The alternative position, that watching television is an active cognitive process suggests that comprehending and remembering information presented on television requires mental elaboration, such that what is retained in memory is not simply what was presented. Examples of mental elaboration include drawing inferences, integrating related ideas, generating hypotheses about what is likely to happen next, filling in information that was missed during periods of inattention or during commercials, and determining when it is "safe" to look away from television to do something else. If watching television is an active process the it would be expected that when children watch television, (a) they do not simply stare at the television and (b) their looks back and forth, to and from television are systematically related to program content. The position that television viewing is an active process portrays watching television as in many ways similar to reading.

Well, what do the research findings suggest regarding Myth #1? Much of the work on this issue can be credited to Daniel R. Anderson from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (cf. Anderson & Lorch, 1983). The data are clear regarding the pattern of looking at the television while "watching television." Lorch, Anderson and Levin (1979) and Pezdek and Hartman (1983) reported that preschoolers watching Sesame Street in a comfortably furnished room with a variety of toys available, looked at the television only 44% of the time. Assessed another way, Alwitt, Anderson, Lorch and Levin (1980) and Anderson and Levin (1976) reported that preschoolers watching Sesame Street averaged about 150 looks at and away from the screen per hour, with the duration of most looks less than 15 seconds. These studies were also conducted in a comfortably furnished laboratory room with a variety of toys available. These results were corroborated in the few home-viewing studies that have been conducted (cf. Anderson, Field, Collins, Lorch & Nathan, in press; Murray, 1972). With children younger than four, the pattern of viewing appears to be less systematic, with both shorter looks but primarily fewer looks at the television (Anderson & Levin, 1976).

So despite the claims that children watching television experience "physiological and psychological depletion" (Sabin, 1972, p. 71) and that television "overwhelms the child..." such that "...he can respond to it only by bringing into play his shutdown mechanism and thus he becomes more passive" (Brazelton, 1972, p. 47), the research findings do not substantiate these stereotypes. In fact, when alternative activities are available in the television viewing room, children look at the television less than half of the time.
Okay, when children are "watching television" they typically time-share the television with other activities and are looking at the television less than half of the time. What determines when they look at television and when they look away, and is this pattern randomly or systematically related to program content? An answer to this question is suggested by the results in the above mentioned studies by Lorch et al. (1979) and Pezdek and Hartman (1983). In comparable conditions in these two studies, memory and comprehension of program content were compared in a condition in which toys were not available to play with during television viewing versus a condition in which toys were available. Despite the fact that children looked at the television significantly more in the no toys condition (87% and 88% respectively) than the toys condition (44% in both studies), recall and comprehension scores did not differ between these two conditions. Apparently, although children were looking at the television only 44% of the time in the toys condition, they knew "the right 44% of the time" to be looking. How could this be?

The interpretation of Lorch et al. (1979) is that when children look away from the television they auditorily monitor the television for cues signaling the need to look back. Children learn early on what auditory cues are associated with important visual information on television and use these cues to direct their visual attention back to the television.

Pezdek and Hartman (1983) offer additional support for the interpretation that while looking away from the television, children monitor the auditory track for cues associated with important visual content. In one condition in this study, children were shown television segments that presented primarily visual information with minimal support from the audio channel. In other words, with these segments no auditory cues were available to signal important visual information during periods of inattention. In this condition, comprehension was significantly reduced in the toys condition (in which visual attention was 44%) relative to the no toys condition (89% visual attention). Remember that there was no difference in comprehension between the toys and no toys condition with the regular auditory and visual segments. Thus, when the audio cues are not available, comprehension of information, even visual information, declines.

Together, these results suggest (a) that much of the time that children spend "watching television" is not spent watching television, and further (b) that the pattern of looking at and looking away from television is systematic, predictable and in sync with program content. These results run counter to the position that television viewing is a passive cognitive activity. Instead, these results suggest that children are actively and selectively gathering information while watching television.

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Scant evidence supports the view that television viewing stifles creativity.

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WHAT about Myth #2, that television viewing decreases creative thinking in children? Again, let's start with a definition of creative thinking. According to the psychological literature on creativity, creativity is operationally defined as the production of divergent ideas (cf. Guilford, 1968; Torrence, 1974). For example, consider an open-ended question such as, "How many things can you think of to do with a balloon?" Creative individuals will produce more ideas ("ideational fluency"), more different conceptual categories of ideas ("ideational flexibility") and more ideas that are statistically infrequent ("ideational originality"). Creativity defined in this way is considered to be a stable trait (cf. Guilford, 1968) that is impervious to change.

Only one study in the literature has utilized a standardized measure of creative thinking to examine the effects of television viewing. Runco and Pezdek (1984) tested the common scenario that sitting around the television today has replaced sitting around the radio from days gone by. And, whereas listening to the radio actively stimulates creativity (Carnegie Commission, 1979), "as soon as a story is placed on film there is no longer any room for imagination" (Trease, 1982).
Runco and Pezdek (1984) presented third-graders and sixth-graders a story on television or radio. They were then given an adapted version of the "Just Suppose" test of divergent thinking developed by Torrance (1974). In this test a hypothetical situation that follows from the story is presented and the child is asked to use her or his imagination to think of all of the things that would have happened if this situation had occurred in the story. Responses were scored for ideational fluency, flexibility and originality. The results were clear; television and radio did not differentially stimulate children's creative thinking.

This finding is consistent with other studies using different measures of creative thinking. Tower, Singer, Singer and Biggs (1979) reported no influence of television on their measure of imaginativeness." And Anderson, Levin, and Lorch (1977) reported no difference in the quality of children's play following a television viewing session versus a parent reading stories. These findings are inconsistent with some other studies (cf. Greenfield, Beagles-Roos, Farrar, and Gat, 1981; Murray, Kwiatek, and Clarke, 1982), although these studies are difficult to interpret due to their use of nonstandardized measures of creativity. Nonetheless, except for these studies, scant evidence supports the view that television viewing stifles creativity.

The hypothesis that patterns of more long-term media exposure may influence creativity has not been studied under controlled conditions. No doubt, a life of viewing excessive amounts of television on a daily basis will result in a dull viewer. But this is more likely caused by the absence of the other activities that television viewing has displaced rather than by the television viewing per se. Nonetheless, the effects of long-term excessive television viewing on creativity have not been determined.

Let's consider Myth #3, that television viewing is an addictive behavior. I think that the spirit of this myth is captured in the report of one of Mander's (1978) interviewees, "I don't want to watch television as much as I do but I can't help it. It makes me watch it" (p. 158). People often feel guilty about the amount of time that they watch television and as if they are "controlled by" television. But is this truly an "addiction"?

Only one study has evaluated the addictive assumptions regarding television. Smith (1985) randomly surveyed hundreds of people regarding their television viewing habits. Both medical and popular definitions of "addiction" were included in the questionnaire. These included self ratings of features of addiction such as (a) increasingly larger "doses" are needed to satisfy the need for television, (b) the viewer has little or no control over the use of the television despite obvious detrimental effects, (c) the viewer makes substantial sacrifices in other arenas in order to maintain high levels of television consumption. Despite the fact that 65% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "television is addictive", none scored at or above the criterion for the existence of the addiction factor in their own responses. Simply put, television is not an addiction.

If television is not really addictive, why do people feel controlled by it? I would like to suggest that this is because television is an omnipresent easy solution for "what to do next." It is unfortunate that humans seem biased to choosing easy, immediately gratifying options before considering more difficult ones. But this appears to be the case. With regard to television, this choice becomes a habitual one. We are all aware of the "effort-boredom-dialectic". That is, even if an activity becomes boring, if it takes more effort to adopt an alternative activity than to continue the boring one, the boring one is often maintained. Admittedly, this is an unfortunate aspect of human behavior. But just because watching television is often the easy but boring activity that is maintained because alternative activities take more effort to initiate, this is no reason to blame television.

It is important to separate good and bad aspects of the medium from good and bad aspects of the programming presented on the medium. Television is a tremendously powerful medium; information presented on television is attention-getting, salient, and better recommended than information presented in other forms of media. The problems are (a) that children in the United States average 20% of their waking hours watching television and (b) in my opinion, the large majority of the programming presented on television is just dumb. But these are problems with how the medium of television is utilized, not problems with the medium per
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The time children spend watching television must be closely monitored. When children spend four to eight hours a day watching television, this reflects serious problems at home. But this is a problem in the family not in the television.

Remember, we all tend to split the world into halves making some things all bad so that other things can be all good. In our generation, television is too often placed in the position of being all bad. Television is getting a lot of the blame for everything from declining reading scores and poor school performance to family problems and poor mental health. We need to put the onus back where it belongs — on the viewers, the parents of young viewers, and the program producers, not on the box known as television.

References


