

Media Realism and Television

Alexander Kuskis, PhD
Adjunct Professor, School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

Media realism is an idea that I've loosely adapted from Technorealism, a set of principles developed during the height of the dot.com boom of the late 1990s, in the midst of all the hype about how the Internet was going to change the world. "The Web Changes Everything" proclaimed *Business Week's* cover of December 4, 1995. It certainly does, but contrary to the dreams of techno-utopians, the changes are not always for the better.

Technorealism was proposed by a group of writers and intellectuals interested in technology as a sane middle ground between the exaggerations of both technophiles and neo-Luddites. It recognizes Neil Postman's dictum that: "Technology giveth and technology taketh away" (*Technopoly*, 1993, p. 5). The principles of Technorealism – which stress the need to recognize the "mixed blessings" and "unexpected consequences" of new technologies - can be found at <http://www.technorealism.org/>.

The media realism derivative that I propose certainly needs to be used in coming to terms with the Internet. But I want to apply it here to another electronic medium which, while being much abused critically, continues to be the most influential medium in our world today – television. TV, aka the "boob tube", the viewers of which are dismissed as "couch potatoes", is usually treated with contempt and condescension, especially by academics and educators. And indeed, instructional television has largely failed for classroom purposes, although educational TV for the general public has enjoyed some notable successes: Kenneth Clarke's *Civilization* (1969), Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* (1973), Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* (1980), and the documentary films of Ken Burns.

Such high profile programming notwithstanding, and despite the influence of *Sesame Street* on pre-schoolers, the bias of TV is towards images and visual information, towards entertainment rather than the intellect, towards shallow impressions rather than in depth understanding, and towards dramatic conflict in narrative story-telling and agonistic interaction (hence the popularity of televised sports and reality TV). Thus the critics of TV, typically academics predisposed by virtue of profession to print media, criticize TV with alacrity. McLuhan calls it the "comic-book medium" (*Understanding Media*, MIT ed, 1994, p. 308), Postman devotes all his energy to describing how TV "taketh away" in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Mander offers *Four Arguments For The Elimination Of Television* (1977) and Gitlin deplors the "supersaturation" of our world by media images and sounds (Media Unlimited, 2002).

Such criticisms of television are important and need to be made. But what is missing in such one-sided critiques is any accounting for the appeal of this most ubiquitous medium (a recent Nielsen survey indicates that half of U.S. homes have 3 or more TVs and only 19% just one). Furthermore, television is invading other media and environments: our work places, computers, cars, trains, planes, and even our cellphones and mobile media. Such criticisms inhibit understanding of why the average American spends an average of 4 hours and 35 minutes watching TV each day, a new high. What is it about this medium that is so compelling? Why has it transformed politics, business, social life, and so many aspects of our existence? And what about the plus side of the ledger? Are there no benefits and advantages to be derived from TV? If it is so noxious, why do we watch it? Are viewers truly unable to determine what is good for them?

A recent book by Metta Spencer – *Two Aspirins & a Comedy: How Television Can Enhance Health & Society* (2006) - redresses the balance to some degree. The author, who is a peace activist and an emeritus professor of sociology, argues that some TV programs convey humanity, idealism and social justice, as well as solace and escape, recounting how the pain she experienced from hip replacement surgery would diminish for hours after watching the Alaska-based program *Northern Exposure*. She notes that measures of intelligence have increased on average by 3 points per decade, which she attributes to the increasing complexity of TV dramatic plots. And she recounts how the film *Ghandi*, which had far wider exposure on TV than in theaters, taught audiences about non-violent methods of protest and helped topple communist governments in the late 1980s. Chapter 1 of Dr. Spencer's book can be read for free at <http://twoaspirinsandacomedy.com/extras/chapter1.html> .

At least some of Dr. Spencer's claims are debatable, but the point is that such debate, rather than a one-sided dismissal of all TV as rubbish, is essential. Otherwise media educators compound high minded cultural condescension with elitist ivory towerism. If all media and technology both give and take away, as Postman contends, then let us understand what TV contributes as well as what it destroys.

The principles of media realism as they apply to TV and other contentious media like video games need to be worked out in detail. There is no room to do so here. But, let me say that the first principle of media realism must be recognition of any medium's benefits as well as deficits. It is not realistic to dismiss and ignore television or any other medium because of its supposed failings without also trying to understand its appeals to the many. Print is not all virtuous, being as capable of producing *Mein Kampf* as the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, and TV is not all corrupt. Indeed, Dr. Paul Levinson, Chair of Communication at Fordham University, has written on his blog - <http://paullevinson.blogspot.com/> - about recent TV drama representing a new "golden age" of television viewing, citing such richly entertaining series as *24*, *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Wire*, *The*

Sopranos. Media realism dictates a more granular even-handed approach, one that eschews personal value judgments and seeks understanding.