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Television, Values, and Art Education  
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Americans watch television: the current national average is eight hours a day. Children watch television: the now familiar estimate is that by the time the average child graduates from high school, 15,000 hours will have been spent watching television compared to 11,000 hours spent in school. Television teaches attitudes, beliefs, and values it deems desirable for society, as does education. If these two educators are in basic agreement and mutually reinforce the teachings of each other, all is pedagogically well for the learner. The following pages, however, suggest that television is not in conformity with the values cherished by education.

Commercial television is about what its name states: commerce. Disregarding television's self-flattering image, the news, sports, and general entertainment programs do not exist to serve minds or raise moral standards, but to make money and increase profits for its corporate investors. The commodity of the business is people. The task of the business is to deliver people, in the case of "Sanford and Son" over 21 million people, for whom Proctor and Gamble, Coca-Cola, or other business will pay \$60,000 per minute. A network's existence depends on its ability to deliver great numbers of people: last year NBC was second to CBS by only nine tenths of one Nielsen rating point (a 5% difference), but that spread meant about 17.5 million advertising dollars more to the winner.

While the three networks together will spend around 500 million dollars on programs this year, television advertisers will aggregately spend over 1.5 billion dollars. Advertising long ago abandoned the practice of announcing goods and services: products are now validated, if only in fantasy, by associations with social and personal meanings. Supplied with research of a very detailed demographic nature concerning product and brand preferences and utilizations, responses to advertising and programs, and the conscious and unconscious goals and motivations of particular segments of the population, advertisers sell everything from genital deodorants to politicians.

The blatant use of human sexuality in advertising is well known. Wilson Bryon Key, however, recently devoted a book<sup>1</sup> to advertisers' use of subliminal techniques by which messages circumvent conscious awareness and are imbedded in the subconscious. Key claims wide usage of words and graphic symbols by advertisers which are either artistically created and hidden with screens in print media, or mechanically transmitted over television at light intensities too low to be consciously detected. Among words said to be used are "sex" and "fuck" while graphic images vary from penises and vaginas to wolves, fish, and other such archetypal symbols. Contrary to general belief arising out of the furor Vance Packard caused years ago by revealing the use of "subliminal cuts," there is no legislation banning such techniques.

Advertisers are particularly adept at selling to children. Apart from the continuing

findings of their respective research departments regarding effective ways to manipulate the emotions of children, the advertisers have many other advantages making the enterprise grotesquely unfair.

Twenty per cent of children's programming is commercials, twelve minutes per hour, compared to the nine and a half minutes allowed to advertisers during adult hours. Adult products are also advertised to children through premiums and free offers. Children's products are also advertised during adult programming: the industry knows that large numbers of children watch late afternoon television but run adult programs to capture a greater audience and include children's commercials. After Thanksgiving many local stations plug in extra children's programs, usually old cartoons, to cash in on lucrative toy advertising revenue, and then drop these programs after Christmas.

Products most heavily advertised to children are cereals, many of which list sugar as the main ingredient, snacks, candy, and toys. A toy commercial utilizing a multitude of fast cuts of an attractive child surrounded by admiring friends in an idyllic home, accompanied by a booming voice and a rousing musical background is no match for a three year old. Not having the facilities to separate fantasy from reality or to set priorities and determine relative importance, being susceptible to adult persuasion, particularly that of television characters whom they trust, normally impulsive and demanding immediate gratification for appealing things, children are easy prey.

So from birth to death we are told visually and verbally in brief but meticulously engineered messages, up to a potential six hundred times a day, that solutions to problems of loneliness, frustration, personal identity, social respect, and death can be successfully negotiated if we merely purchase the right products. If in fact advertising has not solved these problems, it has at least succeeded in convincing a large portion of society that high consumption is a high standard of living, and that the acquisition of commodities is significantly more important than the pursuit of internal qualities.

Advertisers also exert great influence over program content in their choice of what to sponsor. Not wanting any negative feelings associated with their products the program line-up features a preponderance of light entertainment. They also direct the particular type of audience to be attracted: for instance, old people and Blacks are generally undesirable because of their lesser buying power.

In 1969 Proctor and Gamble, with the influence of its 100 million dollar television advertising budget, stated in its written program buying policy that: "There will be no material on any of our programs which could in any way further the concept of business as cold, ruthless, and lacking all sentiment or spiritual motivation..."<sup>2</sup>

Four weeks ago, in reaction to CBS's documentary on hunting which greatly offended the anti-gun control component, a vice-president of Coca-Cola stated: "If we are paying out a lot of money for advertising on a network that does not go along with our type of thinking, then perhaps we here, in this area (Texas), can change networks."<sup>3</sup>

On the matter of documentaries, ABC News routinely lets its major advertisers determine which topics would merit production, or invites their topic suggestions. Space contractor North American chose "The View From Space," which argued for the continuation of the manned space program. B. F. Goodrich, a defense contractor, sponsored documentaries on the war in Viet Nam which were produced with cooperation of the pentagon.<sup>4</sup>

Advertisers have and use their power to promote their positions regarding

controversial social, economic, political, and environmental issues both by what they show us as well as by what they do not permit us to see. While large corporations have freely promoted the Alaskan pipe line, strip-mining, insecticides, and increased electrical power, they have also blocked the airing of positions they have not agreed with. Knowing the auto industry was opposed to the use of air bags as safety devices, all three networks in 1972 would not allow Allstate Insurance Company to buy commercial time to promote their use.<sup>5</sup> In 1969 all three networks refused to broadcast a case against increased defense spending produced by "Citizens Against ABM."<sup>6</sup> When the networks do occasionally attempt to air positions not favored by big business, local stations often refuse to run them. "The Selling of the Pentagon," "Sticks and Bones," "Black Journal," "V. D. Blues," "Castro's Cuba," and "Sesame Street" were rejected by varying numbers of local stations across the country primarily out of fear of losing local advertising revenue.

Equal rights advocates, fearing that people will imitate what they see and thus become what is expected of them, continue to attack television's treatment of women. Their studies of commercials<sup>7</sup> find that women are depicted as domestic drudges or office ancillaries, who are dependent on men emotionally and economically, and that advertising teaches that self-betterment is better achieved through increased sexual appeal than through education or training. The same misconceptions of sexism and stereotyping are echoed in advertising and programming for children. From Saturday morning cartoons, such as "The Jetsons," children see women as scheming, brainless, deceptive, and frivolous people who control men through devious plots but never possess power or dignity themselves. Along similar lines, an analysis of Saturday morning television regarding racial emphasis found that non-American and non-white cultures when, represented at all, were usually referred to negatively with all references to American Indians being derogatory.<sup>8</sup>

It becomes clearer in looking at some of the negative aspects of the medium that education and television are often in ideological and methodological conflict. Both mutually support, for instance, the goal of fostering self-fulfillment of the individual as an important value. Television teaches that the goal may be achieved through the acquisition and consumption of a variety of products and predominantly uses emotional appeal in motivating attainment of the goal. In cherishing the same goal education teaches that it is best achieved through a love of knowledge, and appeals to reason for support. Education, at its best, aids reflective valuation concerning many sides of a given issue. Television often cannot give consideration to unpopular positions regarding given issues and still attract the advertising money to air them. Further, commercial television, with its non-stop programming, mitigates against careful reflection: it is difficult to take any issue seriously when its treatment is immediately followed by outrageous claims about odor causing germs.

Commercial television will continue to update itself to appear relevant but it is not likely to undergo any sweeping reforms of a basic nature. Television critics, with their Sunday supplement arguments for increased quality or moral commitments are ineffectual in swaying the networks' quest for greater and greater numbers of viewers and resulting profits. The industry is equally unmoved by social pressure: faced with angry complaints by organized parents such as Action for Children's Television the industry responded by running ads proclaiming the wonders of children's television. Nor are

advertisers likely to drop successful procedures. The government regulatory agency, charged with the task of seeing that broadcasters "serve the public interest," occasionally pressures the industry into minor concessions but by and large the Federal Communications System (FCC) will continue to support broadcasters' wishes over the public interest. Nicholas Johnson is one notable exception to the general pro-industrial bias of the commission and he was usually a dissenting vote in commission decisions. The FCC commissioners are appointed by the President, and the commission is funded by Congress. Presidents and congressmen in large part owe their elected offices to favorable television coverage, and will most likely continue to support status-quo appointments and decisions out of respect for network influence on voter opinion.

Nor is it likely or desirable that education change itself to reinforce the values of commercial television where it finds them to be antagonistic in form and content. The learners who are confronted by the two forces are caught in the middle with resulting problems in learning and moral development. They are faced with the difficult decisions of rejecting formal education and its structures, ignoring television and those influenced by it, or vacillating aimlessly between the two. A set of choices also emerge for education: it can attempt to change television, ignore-television, or openly confront it. The last option is favored here as the most worthy.

To think that television will change on the recommendations of educators, or any other group short of a large segment of the total population, is unrealistic. To ignore the powerful influence of television is irresponsible to the learner's dilemma and generally irresponsible in that it is a relegation of its educative function to a force it often ideologically and methodologically opposes. A better alternative would be for educators to openly confront those values, attitudes, and beliefs implied in television programming and advertising which they find antagonistic to their own. By a careful and deliberate investigation of television in the classroom for the purpose of clarifying values, education could aid and encourage learners to consciously form their own individual stances toward life.

It is further suggested that the effort be cross-disciplinary in nature, from the pre-school years on, with art educators assuming a leadership role. As professional psychologists, sociologists, producers, art directors, cinematographers, and copy-writers effectively collaborate in communicating to society, professional educators from these respective areas are needed to teach society how to analyze these messages, especially in the case of commercials which are often designed to discourage cognitive evaluation. As research has demonstrated that television is most effective in influencing positions where little prior consideration has been invested, it is important that this endeavor begin, in appropriate forms, at the earliest age possible. Art educators should lead the effort. While we still need considerable preparatory work to effectively meet the challenge, and must draw upon the efforts of related professions, we also enjoy unique advantages. Television is primarily a visual medium: what we finally see on television has been created primarily by visual artists using formal visual qualities in expressive ways to move viewers. We have invested major energies in the study of formal and expressive characteristics of the visual arts, have much experience in articulating this understanding, and have increasingly formulated strategies for teaching critical response.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Wilson Bryan Key, *Subliminal Seduction*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Doan, "Public TV: Is Anybody Watching", *TV Guide*, August 21, 1972, page 14; referred to by Robert Cirino, *Power to-Persuade: Mass Media and the News*, Bantam Books, Toronto, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> *Time* magazine, September 22, 1975, page 73.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Knof, *Variety*, September 3, 1969, Cirino, op. cit., page 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 3, 1972, in Cirino, ibid., page 101.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Cirino, *Don't Blame the People*, Vintage Books, New York, 1972, page 90, Cirino, op. cit., page 101.

<sup>7</sup> Media Committee, National Organization of Women (NOW), referred to by Judith Hennessee and Joan Nicholson, "NOW Says: TV Commercials Insult Women," *New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Pilot Study conducted by Black Efforts for Soul in Television (BEST), Washington, D.C., referred to by Evelyn Kaye, *The Family Guide to Children's Television: What to Watch, What to Miss, What to Change and How to Do It*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1974, page 55.

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