



“Summary of article by Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi: Television and the Structuring of Experience” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 260-262

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi: Television and the Structuring of Experience”**

...[B]ecause consciousness is necessarily formed by exposure to information, media fare helps define what our most important and salient goals should be. Being an intimate part of the consumer society, television tells us that a worthwhile life is measured in terms of how many desirable material objects we get to own, and how many pleasures we get to feel. To achieve such goals complex skills are unnecessary. Even though some people spend a great deal of attention in trying to find bargains, in monitoring prices and sales, in developing culinary taste and fashion sense, in keeping abreast of new models and new gadgets, for the most part consumption does not require much disciplined effort and therefore does not produce psychological growth. (199)

There is little doubt that television plays an important role in the reproduction of consumer culture. On average, individuals spend up to four hours a day in contact with televised information. This paper argues that the indiscriminate viewing of television is harmful to personal growth, and explains why people spend so much time being around televisions; it also describes the differential effects of this behavior on personal development, and offers possible strategies for making television viewing a better experience.

Although everyone needs a sense of order in their lives, individuals vary in how they meet this need. Typically, order is achieved by seeking out or creating information about the world to reassure people that it conforms to individual images of it. Redundant information, for example, reassures us that things are the way we expect them to be. Television is an exemplary source of redundant information; the predictability of shows, the repetitive use of familiar genres and circumstances, and the familiarity of characters all have a reassuring effect. "Many viewers with less structure in their lives, such as retired persons and the unemployed, use television to give shape to the day and to demarcate time." (184) Some shows are even named after the time of day that they come on – for example, The Eleven O'clock News – in order to remind viewers and increase ratings. In some ways, television has co-opted the role that casual conversation once played in telling people the obvious and recounting the familiar.

### **TELEVISION CONTENT AND THE EXISTING SOCIAL ORDER**

Although television viewing facilitates a sense of order, its effects on individuals and culture vary depending on cognitive and life circumstances, viewing habits, and the commercial interests

of television sponsors. Television content promotes the status quo by packaging messages in comforting, easily digestible segments that require little mental effort to enjoy, and by supporting familiar beliefs. The commercial interests of sponsors, which shape content to a certain extent, have less of an effect on consumer demand than the tens of thousands of hours that individuals spend in front of the television. This large investment of time induces an acceptance of an attraction for televised lifestyles as well as the products of television's commercial sponsors.

Advertising promotes a fictitious connection between consumption and self-development when it suggests that the keys to happiness have the shape of its new and improved goods and services. With few exceptions, achieving the pleasures depicted in, or removing the evil pains described by, advertising require less the mental discipline that underlies personal growth than consumer skills that contribute little to self-development. Ultimately, the relationship between consumption, television viewing and self-development is weak, especially for less happy individuals.

The irony is that television may benefit most those who least need it. People who are already reasonably happy and in control of their lives will be more inclined to find useful information on television and will be less inclined to become dependent on the medium. Those who are less happy and less able or skilled in creating order in their experience are more likely to become dependent, and yet derive less enjoyment from their viewing. (187)

## **THE CRISIS OF MEANING**

Excessive and indiscriminate television viewing reflects both a general pattern of short-term pleasure-seeking behavior and a tendency for meaningful information to be structured by sources outside traditional socializing agents. As the mass media has grown, it has become easier for viewers to allow their attention to be structured by outside factors, thus inhibiting more active personal development.

Perhaps no better proof could be offered of how television has come to absorb a significant proportion of the authority and power that the church, family, and school once held than the fact that television celebrities are now among those people most talked about, admired, and emulated in our culture. Television and its celebrities now compete with church leaders, parents, and teachers for the attention of children and are important sources of information for how one should live. (197)

Television messages may describe happy situations, but, in fact, television viewing induces relaxation much more than it does happiness. That individuals choose to pacify themselves should be at the crux of all critiques of television. Any explanation for why individuals indiscriminately watch television must address the reasons why individuals need to escape from life beyond the television.

Those who find fault with the viewing experience must also take seriously the aim of trying to make life as a whole a deeper, more complex, more coherent and

enjoyable experience for as many people as possible. Otherwise we set television up as a scapegoat blaming the most popular form of escape instead of examining why people need to escape, or recognizing that the need for escape is part of the human condition. Indeed the need for escape has long shaped television programs, and will surely influence future programming regardless of technological change.  
(207)

Viewing television can be an active process that engenders growth through mental effort. Better television experiences may be achieved either by teaching the audience how to view shows or by improving content. Viewer skills cannot be improved without changing the reasons why individuals watch television.