The problems of adverse effects of television and film on society; Communication Studies the answer?

William C Faure

In this article the author poses the question of how we come to terms with television in the home and all the effects we suppose it to have. The author suggests that sociological factors play as important a rôle in the whole debate of whether television acts as a mirror or a catalyst. He suggests that censorship is not the answer to the question of the adverse effects of television, but rather that a thinking, discerning audience must be created. This can generate an understanding of the media based upon a reasoning perspective, and ultimately lead to the development of an audience with its own moral perspective.

'Bill Faure

The only thing we know for sure about the effects of television on society is that we actually don't know anything for sure. Why this should be so will be elaborated later, but the fact that TV is a significant force to be reckoned with, becomes terrifyingly apparent when we examine some of the world's viewing statistics.

Children are always the starting point for a discussion of this kind because it is obvious that during their most impressionable years they will be affected in some way by how the world, its politics, attitudes, morals or religious beliefs are reflected by the small screen in the living room.

Place the box alongside the four most important influences in a child's upbringing, i.e. his parents, his home environment, his school and his church and then tabulate the amount of time during which he is exposed to each of these various influences. A frightening statistic emerges.

In America and England studies have shown that the average child spends, very roughly, between ten and twelve thousand hours under the direct influence of his

BILL FAURE is a freelance South African television director and producer of note. Apart from numerous prestigious awards to his credit, he has produced and/or directed major productions for the SABC – notably the massive epic drama Shaka Zulu, due for release this year. Mr Faure has also published a book, Images of Violence.

school — that is, until the end of his school or college career.

Due to the amount of TV available in these countries, the average child is watching between four to five hours of TV a day. This means that in the same period of schooling he could end up assimilating something like 22 thousand hours of TV — nearly double the amount of time he spends with his teachers.

The demands of modern living do not allow his parents to devote the time to him that previous generations enjoyed, so the child is increasingly absorbing attitudes to everything pertaining to his natural development from television rather than from his parents, teachers or ministers of religion.

Assuming that the individual follows what has been established as an average viewing pattern, we come up with a staggering fact: between the ages of three and sixty-five the average viewer will spend the equivalent of 3 000 days of his life watching television!

Obviously, here in South Africa we are still a long way from these kinds of figures, but TV transmission is on the increase. Already we have 3 SABC channels and if we include Bop TV, TV 4 and the soon to be formed M-net channel, then for a country the size of South Africa the amount of viewing time available is staggering, while TV cassette rental simply increases this figure. So, the problems of the world in this respect are not far off for us.

Why should television's influence be any more potent than, say, that of press or radio? Quite simply, the printing press was developed and was gradually assimilated over a period of 500 years. In order to read, the individual had, of necessity, to undergo an educative process of some kind. This process would naturally include a strong moral influence and, in early years, a strongly religious influence.

This then would have dominated the child's concept of the world. His reading and his interpretation of the written word was to be guided throughout by what his elders thought fit for him to assimilate.

If he were to obtain some "undesirable" material, he would absorb the information,

but it would conflict with the influence already exerted on him through his parents, home, school or religion. The balance was always in favour of the last-mentioned factors.

With radio the same applied. In order to understand the language, the child would need a good vocabulary and working knowledge of the language. In other words, a process of education would already have had to begin for these mediums to be effective.

But with TV a child does not have to understand the language to comprehend the fact that two people shouting at each other are probably having a row, that two people in bed are probably making love, that people shooting at one another are killing and being violent.

Thus, murder, violence, fairy tales, fact, fiction — all becomes one and forms an uncontrolled barrage of visual material bombarding the child everytime he or she sits in front of the TV set.

What, then, are the effects of this uncontrolled flow of information? I must reiterate that we don't really know, but there are some interesting points arising out of results of television viewing.

By the sixties the first group of teenagers and students who could be termed 'the telly generation' had emerged. They had grown up with TV, the medium having been introduced around 1947 — 1949.

What emerged was a new kind of generation, one which had in most cases no respect for the establishment and its authority. They began to question the political and moral judgements of their fathers and peers.

Politicians, against their better judgement, had started demanding TV exposure, the theory being that any exposure is better than none. However, once the politician begins to appear regularly on the box, he finds himself in competition with actors, comedians, singers, dancers and presenters.

His status and his image is reduced to the level of entertainer. He can be switched off and, of course, familiarity breeds contempt.

It is no accident that with regard to the

British royal family for instance, very strict rules apply in terms of TV coverage. Seldom, and in the case of the Queen, never, are straight interviews shown or granted. The Queen is always shown surrounded by the trappings of royalty — the palace, the carriage, the soldiers etc. Close-ups are kept to a minimum and the commentary on social occasions is delivered in hushed tones with marked respect clearly audible throughout.

The monarchy in Britain has learned to use the medium to its advantage and has retained its aura of authority and dignity. Of course, it is easy for the monarch and her hangers-on to adopt this policy — they don't have to win votes to remain at Buckingham Palace!

But politicians need votes, so they fall into the trap and somewhere the balance is tipped and all that exposure begins to work against, rather then for them and authority begins to lose its power. In South Africa this has become markedly apparant — politicians no longer command the kind of respect they had in the fifties and sixties, ie. before TV in South Africa.

Religion, too, has suffered. Whereas church leaders were once only seen in church, surrounded by the august trappings of their position — the cathedral, the robes etc. — they are now often seen on TV simply in their suits and they look just like Joe Ordinary next door. The aura is gone and with it the respect and standing that went along with it.

And, like everything else, a service on TV can be exchanged for another programme on another channel or switched off. Worse still, the audience can eat, drink and talk while the service is on. It is really just another programme and unfortunately not half as much fun as an action thriller or variety spectacular.

The sixties also say the advent of the drug culture. Youngsters began experimenting with whatever was available. Of course, sociological factors must be taken into account and in no way can the advent of large scale drug abuse be blamed solely on TV. To say this would be naive, but certainly one factor must be taken into account.

All concerned, directors/producers etc., will demand freedom of expression and the right to reflect society as it is. And, in theory, one must agree. Freedom of expression in the arts is a valuable if not sacred right.

But with TV there is a problem — it is uncontrolled and widely accessible. So when a programme on drug abuse is produced, the director will argue that he is doing it in order to turn people against drug abuse.

However, by talking about the subject he is, in effect, advertising it. He is making people aware of the drug.

He may frighten some people away, but he may also be causing others to become interested in "just experimenting". Thus we must ask ourselves whether TV is a mirror of society or a catalyst... a difficult question and one for which there are no answers at present.

It is interesting to note that in regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, Mexico and India where drugs have been used for centuries for social, religious or medicinal purposes there has been no marked increase in the use of drugs — in fact, in some places there has been a decline.

In these countries there is little or no TV, but also the sociological problems have remained relatively constant and the youth have generally followed the traditional patterns of their parents.

One of the most serious questions one must ask pertaining to TV as a catalyst or mirror, is audience reaction to violence. Quite often on TV violence is seen to be the solution to a problem. From an early age the child picks this up and eventually accepts that violence is a legitimate means of expression.

On TV it is all so easy; cops kill without ever, or at least, seldom, having to give reasons for killing the suspect. Seldom is a report written or the implications of the event explored.

Often the killer or criminal becomes the hero. Morality is blurred and obscured by the need for action and sensation. And amidst all this the child is expected to find out for himself what constitutes correct moral behaviour. Small wonder then that by the late sixties violent demonstrations

45

began to be the order of the day — although other factors also played their part.

Television creates expectations, increasing aspirations, many of which cannot be met by society. TV depicts life-styles and characters to which the young aspire, but few will ever have a chance of reaching even half way.

Before the advent of TV the child had to create his own dreams, provide his own amusement, be creative and constructive in channelling time into such pursuits. Now if boredom prevails, TV is the answer — it supplies the dreams and the fantasies.

A child was once caught beating his own cat to death with a hammer. His reason for doing it was straight, honest, without malice: "I wanted to see the lump grow out of the cat's head like it does in the Tom and Jerry cartoons". Since the cat always recovers, seemingly without any ill effects, who can blame the child for wanting a bit of fun just like the cartoons showed. After all, aren't Tom and Jerry cartoons simply good, clean fun?

The thorny problem of violence is related to the equally difficult question of censorship. One of the major problems facing film and television producers is how to please all the people all the time. We know it is not possible and unfortunately there is an almost instinctive reaction by many to simply condemn (sometimes without giving any thought to the other man's point of view) something which they themselves might find distasteful or distressing and then they resort to censorship.

Ideally there should be complete freedom of expression (I must stress that I would apply this statement only to cinema, as opposed to television) and all forms of censorship should be abolished. But this requires great political courage and of course raises considerable religious, social and moral issues.

In very general terms however, the reasons for censorship in an orderly society can be attributed to, firstly, governments who have an interest in maintaining stability and preventng statements or utterances which could upset their own policies.

Then, closer to home, there is parental control. Many parents have an interest in ensuring that their children are not exposed to influences which could cause the child to develop along 'undesirable' lines.

But, unfortunately, once a medium, be it film, television or even literature, has to adhere to certain standards which are then applied to all works on an equal basis, that medium simply becomes a tool in the hands of the body dictating the standards — and this despite the writer or director.

Films which enlighten people as to flaws in their societies, or increase the audience's awareness of the inadequacies of their governments, or could be construed as provoking or inspiring people to rebel against established thinking, are not going to be welcomed by governments which feel in any way insecure.

Thus, politically motivated censorship is possibly the most straight-forward. The decision made merely has to take into account whether the ideas expressed in the film are in accordance with the policies of the regime. If not, then the film can simply be tailored or barred completely.

But censorship, whether applied on political, social or moral grounds, will always come into conflict with art, since it is seldom possible to disentangle from a film or television programme those parts considered undesirable without destroying the artistic feel of the production.

In South Africa this has been a major problem in the past. Frequently outstanding films have been rendered impotent by injudicious, at times totally insensitive and inept cutting by a censor board which has frequently shown no feel for art of sensitive statements.

The South African adult is treated like a child, when in fact the level of sophistication amoung South African audiences is on a par with that found in Europe and North America (in fact television has played an important role in raising the level of audience's taste in recent years).

Our censors are therefore totally out of touch, although recently there seems to be a more adult approach.

The greatest need for censorship seems to come from the belief that the younger

generation's vulnerability during certain stages of their developments make it essential that they should be protected from any adverse or harmful effects which cinema or television may present and it is, understandably, violence which seems to be the major cause for concern.

However, there is a major problem — society is ambivalent towards violence. Society allows violence in defence of property. It abhors murder, but at the same time it is forced to train some of its members in the art of killing.

Cinema and television are caught right in the middle. Society uses violence on the screen to foster a belief in violence as a legtimate tool for law and order, or a way of winning political issues, as when it goes to war.

The "artist", on the other hand, who is opposed to violence will use that medium and the violence contained in the medium to attack the use of violence. This then gives rise to conflicting ideologies and conflicting ways in which violence is used and the censor will ultimately support his own point of view.

Nowhere is this ambiguity more alarmingly apparent than in the war films of any particular country, where attitudes to violence become terrifyingly explicit.

War is usually presented in the national interest with the glorification of espionage and violent heroics, leaving audiences in deep admiration of men who achieve their successes by killing great numbers of people.

In some cases production companies even receive government support in producing these films, the support taking the form of manpower, the loan of military equipment and large "props" such as battleships and aircraft, which are worth millions of dollars in real cost.

It is a strange fact that, although these war films will often show the most unbelievable atrocities, bloodshed and suffering, the militarists realize their potential propaganda power and do not fear their being interpreted as anti-war sentiments.

Hollywood has mastered the techniques of pro-war films: "The Longest Day", ""The Green Berets" and "The Dirty Dozen", to name but three among thousands.

But the use of violent imagery in war films to induce the beholder into sympathising with an ideology is by no means a new device. The church has been using this technique for centuries and with great success, heroic martyrdom and violence being integrated into the telling of stories and legends to stir up emotions, even in children.

Seldom, if ever, do parents stop to think what effect such violent images as a crucifixion or a battle could have, psychologically, on a young child. Out of context, ie religion or war (the national interest), these images would be condemned as unfit for children to see at an early age.

Then there are the Bond pictures, showing a hero who kills his way nonchalantly in one fantastic situation after another. He is "licensed to kill" and he does, with a tenacity and panache that almost rivals the excessive violence of Tom and Jerry cartoons.

The philosophy of Bond is similar to the perverted reasoning behind the justification of the violence in straight-forward war films. He is on our side, so whatever he does, however violent, is justified.

If any form of violence is to be looked at more closely for possible adverse affects, then it is the "Bond" type of picture. He epitomises violence, sex and all that money can buy, and audiences revel in his freedom and power. He Is asking to be aped by the impressionable child. Once again the censor is ambiguous in his assessment of the situation before him.

It is a highly complex situation, not remedied by censorship. It is unlikely that the James Bond image is of such magnitude that it will inspire a host of 00 agents to suddenly emerege and take up arms for South Africa, but such films do reduce violence to a level of acceptance that, if nothing else, becomes tasteless and insensitive to the value of life.

In fact, the 'Rambo' image in America has been aped by children to such a degree that a group of adolescents actually attacked a suburb in 'Rambo' fashion.

If censorship is not the answer, then how

do we come to terms with television in the home and all the effects we suppose it to have? Everything I have mentioned — violence in society, drugs, lack of respect for authority, sexual permissiveness, declining religion, violence etc. — cannot be blamed solely on TV.

Sociological factors play as important a role in this whole debate of mirror or catalyst. So what are the answers to the question of the adverse effect of TV? The answer is simple: a thinking, discerning audience must be created.

Now we come to ask ourselves what we mean by the word "audience" — and here are my reasons for believing that we will never really know what the effects of TV are on society generally.

The fact is that effect or impact is relative; it is a class probability. In other words, a child brought up in a slum, surrounded by violence, social degradation and sexual permissiveness is going to look at and interpret things he sees on TV in a totally different way to that of an individual brought up in an area protected and guided by strong moral and social values.

Whereas the first might find violence quite acceptable since that is the way of his area or his sociological level, the other may be shocked or frightened by depiction of violence and deeply affected psychologically.

Because TV is so easily accessible to anyone, a one-year-old child to a deranged adult with an acute personality disorder could be affected by what they see. Who is to say what the reaction might be? The variables are so diverse, so wide, it would be difficult to pinpoint exactly how what will affect who.

It is a problem that will only be overcome by an advanced education system whereby the audience must be taught to cope with what the medium presents and not make the medium adapt to a particular audience.

In the cinema the problem is made slightly easier for the director/producer because the age restrictions at the cinema will ensure that the audience is controlled to some extent, ie. children will be prevented from seeing something potentially psychologi-

cally disturbing and so direct censorship of the film is unacceptable to the director.

But TV is different. It is so readily accessible that controls must be enforced. But where does the director begin to determine the extent of his self-censorship?

In the case of the SABC, does it decide to avoid Tom and Jerry cartoons because because one or two children may be affected adversely somewhere?

Does it avoid showing some action thriller because somewhere out there among its millions of viewers some deranged human being may be stimulated into killing somebody because he has just seen it being done by someone on TV.

Obviously the bounds of good taste must prevail (just exactly who's good taste is again difficult to decide) and always the knowledge that children are watching must be foremost in the minds of the TV authorities, but it is unreasonable to expect an organisation like the SABC to bear all the responsibility.

Society and the individual must carry a fair share of the burden and one of the most important institutions in this regard is the Department of Education. In terms of preparing the child to meet the onslaught of modern society and, in particular, the onslaught of the age of electronics and mass communication, our education system has and continues to fail totally.

The syllabus is outdated — it is no use deciding to give the child sex education in standard seven or eight. He has learnt all there is to know from TV long before he has finished primary school.

Political studies, history, sociology, economics, war, sex and violence are among the subjects he is taking before he gets out of nursery school.

Has anyone bothered to tell the youngster who still believes in Father Christmas and tooth fairies that what he is seeing on TV is perhaps not all as real as he thinks it is?

Has anyone bothered to put it all in perspective? Does he or she understand that the reality of a news bulletin is not the same as the exploits of Magnum or the A Team?

Does the child realise that simply be-

cause 007 dresses well, has lots of good-looking girlfriends, drives a fancy car and knows all about good wine, it does not make his violence any more acceptable than that of any other policeman or criminal? Moral perspective, an ability to define good and bad, is what I am talking about here.

Studies over the years have attempted to discover some scientific way of judging the two possible effects of violence on the individual, namely catharsis (a release from tension and aggression through subjection to screen violence) or mimesis (a stimulatory effect causing emulation of the violence), but they have all been inconclusive.

It is unlikely that the decision to avoid all scenes of violence can be justified, unless research into the differential effects of different types of mass media violence can be carried out, but even then the question remains as to how we are to balance the bad effects against the good.

Those who so glibly demand that the SABC or film producers control violence or sex should ask themselves these questions: Where should this control begin? How is the SABC to gear its programme content level to that which would be regarded as safe for anyone who happens to have access to a television set?

The answer lies not in controlling the media, but the audience. It is time that parents, teachers and education authorities began to realize they have a significant role to play, and I don't mean by interfering in the internal workings of the SABC or other broadcasting bodies.

Where are the parents who will take the trouble to spend time explaining the moral implications of what their children are seeing on TV everyday?

Where was the parent to explain to the child beating the cat to death that what he was seeing on television was not reality, but simply a fantasy world? Where is the education system meeting its responsibilites towards the new "telly generation".?

The child must be taught to discriminate and cope with the media just as he is taught to cope with his literature, his music and his art! It is important that film and television should be studied in their own right as powerful forces in our culture. To date, this has not been effectively done anywhere in the world.

Here in South Africa we lost a golden opportunity with the late introduction of TV. From the very onset we could have studied the new medium as a cultural force, both in schools and in universities. Had we done so, the training colleges could today be turning out lecturers and teachers qualified to teach Media Appreciation (even if it were only one period a week) and a proper course entered into the university curriculum.

Thus I ask that parents and the education system realise that they have a duty to perform by placing before the child a reasoning perspective upon which he can begin to base an understanding of the media and ultimately develop for himself a moral perspective.

Then, fears that the violence and sex in films and television will stimulate a tendency towards "immoral" conduct could be significantly reduced and directors and producers can be allowed to develop and mature, without fears of what effects the product could be having on the audience.

NOTE: With the introduction of international satellite TV link-ups fast becoming a reality and a feeling that computers should be utilised for educative puposes, another source of uncontrolled information will be added to that already in existence – and the need for media research will become even more acute!

References

McLuhan, M., and Fiore, G. (1967) *The Medium is the message.* New York: Bantam Books.

Glucksmann, A. (1971) *Violence on the Screen.* London: British Film Institute Education Department.