

# Let's Put The Vision In Television!

Television has a vital role to play in helping us move towards a more humane and sustainable planet

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For many persons seeking to adopt more ecological ways of living, broadcast television is about as popular as dioxin on the morning granola. Although this is an understandable feeling given the abysmal quality of programming, it overlooks the vital role that television can play in helping us move towards a more humane and sustainable planet. Before exploring this latter theme, I would first like to acknowledge how impoverished is our current use of this medium.

To say that television is a "vast wasteland," or a "boob tube" is to understate the case. Many view television with more than healthy skepticism—after talking with thousands of persons, I have found a deep cynicism and even scorn when the subject of television is raised.

This feeling of despair is surely justified. In a daily ritual, I sit before the electronic fireplace of my television set and watch the evening news. A confusing mixture of headlines rushes by with reports of toxic wastes, nuclear escalation, distant wars, natural disasters, and many more. At the end of a half hour, my mind is a blur of images, concerns and commercial messages. I switch off the set knowing that the rest of the evening stretches out with a virtually uninterrupted flow of situation comedies, action-dramas, and made for TV movies—all seemingly designed to provide an easy escape from the pressing reality witnessed moments before. Often I recall a statement made by Walter Cronkite who said that compressing the evening news into a half hour was, for him, like trying to fit "one hundred pounds of news into a one pound sack." My mind feels increasingly like Walter's one-pound sack - splitting apart at the seams, trying to cope with this hyper-compression of reality. A gnawing dissatisfaction persists as I wonder how these electronic glimpses of a troubled world fit into larger patterns of meaning,

or what important trends are at work that we are not seeing, or what the future implications of these urgent issues might be.

I plead with unseen network executives that I am more than a consumer who wants to be entertained—I am also a citizen who needs to be informed. And I wonder how many other "citizen-viewers" feel that the American people are entertainment rich and knowledge poor?

As a writer and researcher, I have spent more than a decade examining urgent challenges facing our nation—environmental pollution, social complexity, urban decay, resource depletion, species extinction, and many more. How can I describe the great tension I feel between the pressing problems facing our nation and the trivial, tranquil, superficial reality that inundates our nation's consciousness night after night on television?

In my mind's eye, I sometimes feel like one of the engineers working down in the innards of the great ship Titanic. Upon seeing an iceberg rip a giant hole in the side of the ship and water pour into the engine room, I run upstairs to the main ballroom where people are dining and dancing in splendor and comfort. I rush to the ballroom stage and urge the master of ceremonies to begin making plans for coping with this encroaching disaster. The master of ceremonies brushes aside my concerns, saying that everyone knows the ship is unsinkable and that it would be a breach of good taste to interrupt the evening's entertainment with such harsh and unpleasant concerns as threats to our survival.

Our situation as a nation seems similar. The chieftains of the television industry seem to think that the great ship of America is unsinkable, and that there is no need to interrupt the steady flow of entertainment programming to raise such unpopular concerns as threats to our survival. In turn, the public—unaware of the rising tide of dangerous trends—is further lulled into complacency and passivity. Instead of using the immensely powerful medium of television to awaken ourselves to action, we are given another dose of the cultural barbiturate of fantasy-based programming, the American public deepens its false sense of security, and we continue our drift towards disaster.

Some may protest that I am placing an undue responsibility upon television for promoting a more active democracy and communicating society that can cope effectively with the challenges before us. Yet, the potentials of this medium for helping us choose a more workable and meaningful future are enormous. More than a decade ago, Marshall McLuhan asserted that television would bring about revolutionary changes in how people perceive the

world. Television, said McLuhan, brings with it an immediate deepening and widening of our human capacities for awareness and involvement, extending our nation's central nervous system to a global embrace. With the speed of light, television can bring social and political concerns home to us in a way that heightens our awareness of, and sense of responsibility to, the other members of the human family. This awareness compels commitment and participation in the affairs of humankind, irrespective of our political viewpoints.

Current television programming falls far short of this possibility. Instead, the hard realities of life—the sharp edges and painful struggles of real people—are replaced by a fantasy world inhabited by plastic characters moving through predictable conflicts that are told through mind-numbing dialogue and supported by machine-produced laughter. No wonder so many people are cynical about the potentials of television. Yet, it is also true that television offers the potential of bringing distant wars, people, and events so close to us that we can seemingly reach out and touch them. It is this closeness, intimacy and nearness of television's window onto the world that brings with it a feeling of expanded involvement and participation in the concerns of our planet.

Robert Fuller, former president of Oberlin College and a social activist concerned with finding positive alternatives to the nuclear arms race, said this of the role of television: "Television is a revolutionary form of witness that makes us all onlookers. It can be a kind of world conscience. You know how each of us has a voice inside that serves as our moral conscience? Well, television is the voice outside us....Used properly, the telecommunications revolution could serve as a technological counterweight to the threats posed by nuclear weapons technology." If nuclear weapons make war unwinnable, they also make a whole new level of human communication unavoidable. A lasting peace can only come through a new level of human understanding. A new level of human understanding requires a new level of human communication. Because television is our nation's most powerful vehicle of communication and awareness, it is imperative that we begin to use this technology for the mature purpose of elevating our capacity for national dialogue and social imagination. Simply stated, we must communicate or perish.

If communication is the lifeblood of a healthy democracy, then broadcast television provides an unbalanced and impoverished diet of programming for the citizens of the world's most powerful democracy. Currently, more than 95% of prime-time hours are devoted to

entertainment. Our situation seems similar to that of a long-distance runner who prepares for a marathon by eating 95% junk food. We are trying to run a modern democracy almost exclusively on a diet of TV entertainment at the very time when our nation confronts problems of marathon proportions. This severe imbalance in programming can, in the words of Walter Cronkite, "lead to disaster in a democracy."

Our current manner of using television is more than a minor inconvenience or an offense to "good taste." It is crippling our capacity to comprehend and respond to our situation as a nation facing a time of profound transition. We are prostituting the most precious resource that we have as a civilization—our shared consciousness. We are trivializing and demeaning our collective awareness at the very time when we desperately need images of a more workable and sustainable future. Can we imagine more positive uses of this medium?

Television is still in its infancy. We have barely begun to imagine and explore the new kinds of programming that we could develop to support a more active democracy and communicating society. As I flip through the pages of the *TV Guide*, I wonder why our nation—known throughout the world for its ingenuity and inventiveness—could not produce more creative, engaging and impactful programming for its citizens? Why not have:

- A global news broadcast that nightly explores the major events and trends affecting the whole world?
- A "good news" broadcast that shows examples, large and small, of families, communities and nations working to help one another?
- A weekly show that explores alternative images of the future and what it would be like to live in those futures?
- Regular, national "electronic meetings," the equivalent of the New England town meeting, where citizens debate and build a renewed consensus around critical issues and priorities?
- A program that shows regularly families and communities coping successfully with hard times?
- Intelligent social satire that helps us poke fun at our ways of living, working, and governing ourselves?

- "Viewer feedback forums" that let us talk back to the networks and local stations and tell them how we feel about the current menu of programs?
- A weekly program that explores the many different aspects of the nuclear arms race and that explores peaceful alternatives to the current path of nuclear escalation?

Because the television industry has not developed these types of informational programs at a pace equal to our rapidly changing needs as citizens, we now confront a "communications gap" that threatens the workability of our democracy.

A more balanced media diet that allocated, for example, one-third of prime-time hours to a new generation of socially relevant television could stimulate a revolution in our level of social imagination, national understanding, and citizen participation in our democratic processes. We could rapidly achieve a new capacity for social dialogue that explores all sides of the many urgent issues and choices facing our nation. We could begin to see clearly the living circumstances, viewpoints, and concerns of the many other parts of our society and world now hidden from public view. We could build a new national consensus around a sustainable future. We could discover a renewed sense of national identity and purpose that again draws out our enthusiastic participation in the affairs of our country. Because the opportunity is so great, it would be a tragedy if we do not work to realize the enormous potentials of this medium on behalf of our democracy.

Is the public ready for a new generation of socially relevant television? National polls indicate that nearly half of the adult population is dissatisfied with current programming; that by a two-to-one margin people feel that TV has gotten worse rather than better over the past ten years; that news and public affairs programming is rated as the "most enjoyable" program category by a majority of adults; and that a majority feels there is not enough informational programming while there is more than enough entertainment programming. While these surveys do not prove that the public wants to see a major increase in socially relevant programming, they do indicate there exists much more interest and receptivity than commonly imagined.

We have reached a pivotal time in human history. An era of momentous change is already upon us and many possible pathways into the future lie before us. Which pathway we choose will depend directly upon our capacity for social communication and imagination. Because we cannot choose a future that we have not imagined, it's time for us to put our personal visions into television. If we are to choose democratically a more workable and meaningful

future, then we need to begin, in earnest, to imagine vivid and compelling alternatives to the status quo. We need to freshly see who we are as a people and where we want to go from here. This will not happen automatically. Like the civil rights movement, the environmentalist movement, the feminist movement and others, this movement too will require the vocal support and vigorous efforts of citizens across the country.

Thus far, the most socially aware and socially concerned members of our society have largely turned away from active involvement in transforming television. By default, the television industry has been given a free license to use the public airwaves almost exclusively for purposes of commerce and entertainment. We have no one but ourselves to blame. If we were to assert our media rights as "citizens-viewers" with a level of effort approaching, for example, that of the nuclear freeze movement, the impact on our nation's use of television would be dramatic and rapid. By using the tools of non-violent action and social change that have been learned in the decades past, we could rapidly move our democracy into the communications age.

What can be done to make a meaningful and visible difference in television programming? Here are a few suggestions. First, take the initiative and write letters to your local stations—either praising their creativity or pointing out their omissions and timidity. Letters do get read and, if as few as half a dozen come in on a given theme, they may be circulated among the station staff. Also, letters are better than phone calls as they go into the public file that every station is required to keep. Second, write an article on the unmet programming needs of citizens for publication in a local newspaper, newsletter or magazine. Detail your needs and positive suggestions for change—this will make more people aware of the issue of media reform. Third, talk with local public interest organizations and find ways to add media responsibility to their agenda of concerns. Many public interest organizations are continually seeking ways to gain greater access to the public through the media, so this can be a natural extension of their ongoing work. Fourth, help form a coalition among public interest groups and then collectively petition the local stations for a more balanced use of air time. Fifth, use the opportunity for "free speech messages" or citizen editorials that a number of stations provide to address the issue of media responsibility and balance in programming. Sixth, get involved in the production process itself. Learn the skills of using television technology through public access facilities that are available through many local cable stations and some broadcast stations. Work to see that the concerns of various groups get a fair hearing. Seventh, support the work of our non-profit organization and

our attempt to develop media responsibility into a national issue worthy of searching and sustained debate.

Why is it important to get involved in this issue? Media responsibility is not "just another issue." This is an issue upon which virtually all other issues depend—only with an effective means of communication can we begin to grapple with the many serious challenges to our future.