



Why Am I Watching This?

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Abstract: Recently, after a few minutes of watching TV, I grew bored and abruptly asked my boyfriend, “Why are we watching this?” He agreed it was boring and changed it to the Bruins game, but my question continued to circulate in my head. Why *were* we watching it? Using a variety of sociological perspectives and concepts—such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, exchange and rational choice theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and postmodern perspective—I started to look at possible motivations that could account for dedicating so much time to an activity that, much of the time, does not provide the element of entertainment that it is used for. The idea that too much television is not good is anything but a novel idea. Since TV’s inception there has been criticism. Recently there has been a growing concern to inform the public. The White Dot project is one group that promotes a television free lifestyle. TV Turn Off Week 2006, took place the week of April the 24th. I decided it was important for me to take part in it. What I experienced that week was: more of a life—more free time and more time spent doing things that mattered.

Recently I was unwinding with my boyfriend, when he turned on the reality show *The Real World*.

On the show, three of the roommates were feeling a little hungry and decided to make some macaroni and cheese. After they had eaten the macaroni, they loaded the dish washer and turned it on. One of them had mistakenly used dish soap, which caused the dishwasher to overflow.

After a few minutes of watching the show, I grew bored and abruptly asked my boyfriend, “Why are we watching this?” He agreed it was boring and changed it to the Bruins game, but my question continued to circulate in my head. Why *were* we watching it? The action being portrayed was so mundane and inconsequential that, if it took

place in my actual life, I would forget it within a day. The people in it, while mildly attractive, were far from captivating. So why were we watching it? For that matter, why have I watched hours of forgettable television throughout my life?

Watching television has always been my customary pastime—not my favorite one but one that I did everyday. When I was younger, I tracked time by shows, not hours. I am one of five children, and putting *Sesame Street* on was the best way for my parents to keep me occupied. This is probably how televiewing became a routine activity that I engaged in when I had spare time. Every Friday night was TGIF—a two hour line-up of shows that, like most other first graders of the time, I waited for all week. Later in my

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childhood *Saved By the Bell* or *Beverly Hills 90210*, sparked the imaginations of my sisters and I, making our make-believe time much more saucy. We idolized the rich and beautiful California teenagers in both of these shows, and wished that someday our lives could resemble theirs.

I would like to claim that I have become a more discriminating viewer as an adult, but I am still guilty of watching the rich and beautiful California teenagers on the O.C. Even today my end of the day activity is, the majority of the time, watching the tube. Much of the time I watch episodes of syndicated shows that I have already seen many times in the past. Some of the time I make more thoughtful choices; I love HBO and think that most of the shows on there are worthy of attention. Most of the time, however, I am not entertained by what I am watching on television. This particular night was the first time I really thought about the inherent contradiction of being bored by your choice of entertainment.

I began thinking about the absence of analysis there is for most people in relation to television. The average American spends four hours a day watching television—about half the time spent either sleeping or working (www.whitedot.org). Despite the predominance of routine televising in people's lives, most don't consider critically the causes, nature, and consequences of watching television. Many regard it as a behavior that is undertaken only when "real" action isn't taken place. How many times have you heard someone say "I did nothing last night," only to have them clarify that nothing really meant watching TV. By deeming television as a non-activity, it is easier to dismiss the possibility that it is a dominating force in our lives. While it would have been easier to remain disengaged yet captivated by the glowing screen than to critically examine the impact of television on my life, watching TV monopolized too much of my daily routine not to take a second look.

I started to look at possible motivations

that could account for dedicating so much time to an activity that, much of the time, does not provide the element of entertainment that it is used for. When I posed the question to my friends, a common response that I got from people was, "what else am going to do?" It was taken for granted that when you are left to occupy yourself, watching television is the most obvious choice of activity; yet, it is simultaneously considered a last resort. It is easy to forget that a relatively short time ago people did entertain themselves differently. Prior to the presence of television, members of the family spent a great deal of the evening hours interacting, either with each other or with relatives and neighbors (Kottak, 1990). Though I always complain about not having enough time, especially quality time with friends and family, I consistently choose to practice a type of behavior that has less merit.

The **phenomenological** perspective in sociology teaches us to take a critical stance, and to challenge the socially constructed ideas that have accumulated over time (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Along with looking critically at the so-called "social facts," it is also important to look at the everyday behavior that we take for granted, like the routine of watching TV. The maintenance of a **routine** is important for the stability of our own personalities and society's institutions—which is why ending each day with a few hours of television is so common for people. Routine is also "psychologically linked to the minimizing of unconscious sources of anxiety' and is the predominant form of day-to-day social activity" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Televising is the most widespread example of routine behavior, but it is one whose purpose is not always apparent. The basis of the phenomenological perspective is the idea that "all knowledge comes directly from sensory phenomena. Anything else is speculation, and (Edmund) Husserl argued that we should not even try to speculate" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). However, because I was conducting self-research I needed to move beyond phenomenology in order to specu-

late on the motives, implications and consequences of watching television as they apply to myself and the society at large.

Television is ideally a form of entertainment and a one-sided medium of communication. Like all social interactions, people choose whether to participate in televiewing by weighing the **costs** against the **rewards**. Aside from the price of a television as a device and the electrical costs—watching television is free. Broadcasting companies provide the masses an undemanding diversion, to relieve frustration and entertain—but what do they receive in return? **Exchange theory** proposes that social interaction is an “exchange of tangible or intangible goods and services (Wallace & Wolf, 2006).” Televiewing is a particular type of social interaction where entertainment in the form of programs is exchanged for money produced by advertisements. It is easy to experience a **cognitive dissonance**, or a contradiction between reality and what should be happening, if you first consider TV to be a service provided. If television is a form of entertainment, then the benefit should go to the individual receiving it. It is a common perception that the function of commercials is to fund television, but the truth of the matter is that television as a medium was instituted as a way to sell products.

The average American spends one year watching commercials in their lifetime. “The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reports that in 2002, there was more than \$41 billion spent in broadcast television advertising in the United States” (Kaufman, 2004). The advantage is completely on the end of the conglomerate companies that make billions of dollars in profit as a result of commercials. **Rational choice theory** assumes that people make decisions based on a rational assessment of all available options (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). An important component of advertising is the creation of choice. When people buy things, they go through many critical decisions about the need, cost and value of product. “Which brand we buy is secondary to the primary

ritual of purchase, nourished and sustained by the language of television advertising” (Kaufman, 2004). First, advertisers suggest deficits in the life of the viewer, and then promote their product’s “unique” features, usually on false premises, in order to create a demand for products. “TV sells a lifestyle—it sells choices—even where there are no choices” (Kaufman, 2004).

Television is, at best, a form of entertainment and medium of communication and, at worst, a way for companies to bombard viewers with messages; but there are many other functions that it consequently serves. People use TV to build or enhance images of self, chart social courses, and formulate life plans (Kodak, 1990). According to the **symbolic interactionist** perspective, individuals learn what behavior and events mean through interaction with others. Television is not a face-to-face interaction, yet it leaves a lasting impression nonetheless. People communicate through **symbols** with common, widely understood interpretations. In order to effectively communicate information about oneself symbols must be used. Erving Goffman’s idea of **dramaturgy** likened social interaction to a theatrical performance, and puts all other behavior into this context. **Impression management** is how an individual controls the impressions others form of him or her. To accomplish successful presentation of self in public, techniques of impression management are practiced in what Goffman called the **back region**. A place hidden from the “audience,” the back region is where the formation of the public self takes place (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Considering the dominance of the behavior of watching TV that occurs within the back region, it seems likely that time used for impression management overlap with televiewing and that the symbols from TV will be used to build image of one’s self.

An example of the effect of television’s content on impression management is how the images of *90210* and *Saved by the Bell* resulted in my desire for others to perceive me to be like the characters on those shows. On

an individual level, TV resulted in a conscious change in my behavior to alter people's impression formed of me. Television similarly affects how all members of society conduct themselves. It is a wide-reaching socializing agent that alters the behavior, values, and perceptions of society.

Television as a socializing agent is unique because it remains relatively consistent between different locations. This uniformity facilitates integration of all members in society. "TV shows guide decisions, inform perception and provide examples of conduct" (Cater & Adler, 1975). Television can increase the skills of social navigation and communication of those "outsiders" being assimilated into a society. TV easily competes with family, schools, peers, community and church in providing models of behavior (Kottak, 1990). Television like other **institutions**, or deeply embedded patterns of social practices or norms, plays a significant role in the organization of society. Institutions exist because they contribute to the reproduction and integration of society. While society depends on reproduction and integration—too much or too little of the incorporation of individuals into the social order is unhealthy for a society. Television is "so inextricably woven into the social fabric it is extremely difficult to view it as an institution in its own right," and most of the time the effect that television has on us is imperceptible (Cater & Adler, 1975).

The **social construction of reality** is the process by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially accepted as reality (Wallace, & Wolf 2006). TV cultivates homogeneous outlook on social reality, uniting the population exposed to it to a common set of images and symbols. TV content influences mass culture because it provides widely shared common knowledge beliefs and expectations (Kottak, 1990). Television reiterates the **values**, or the widely shared beliefs that support the **legitimacy**, or worthiness of recognition, of our social structure. Values also the affirm kinds of behavior that transpire within our society (Wallace & Wolf,

2006). In Mitch Albom's book *Tuesday's with Morrie*, Morrie tells Mitch that, while it is okay to follow the little rules of society, "the big things—how we think, what we value—those you must choose for yourself. You can't let anyone, or any society, determine those for you" (Albom, 1997: 155). It is not only the entertainment programs that project questionable values that one should be wary of, but also the ones that promise to provide you with the truth.

It is easy to take for granted that reputable news sources will be unbiased, but C. Wright Mills contends that our society is maintained by three dominating parties—all with special interests. Power within the American society is found in the economic, political and military domains—which interlock to form what Mills called the "**power elite**" (Wallace and Wolf, 109). Since corporations and the government are so reliant on each other, it is impossible to receive information from television that is not tainted by both.

The **collective conscience** is the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). TV can produce unfounded feelings of solidarity shared widely by people who have grown up within the same society (Kottak, 1990). The collective consciousness that television provides is a false one, that impedes the possibility for positive change in society. Present forms of television, and habits of receiving it, reduce one's ability to judge, select, and participate (Cater & Adler, 1975). "**False consciousness** implies a misperception of reality, or of one's relationship to the world of which one is part (Wallace & Wolf)." Television fosters an illusion of discussion of problems, as well as human contact and conversation. It gives one a false sense of democratic participation, awareness and understanding, and of order and control (Cater & Adler, 1975).

For many, television is a painkiller used to relieve anxiety. It becomes a reality substitute, diverting attention from the world's issues and replacing action with passive ab-

sorption. "TV has become reality for many people, because it is more tolerable than any other 'real' reality" (Cater & Adler, 1975). People claim they watch TV to relieve frustration, but it may be an attempt to tune out reality. In the movie *The Matrix*, Cypher, one of the people who are enlightened about the reality, or the antithesis of reality—the Matrix—chooses to knowingly return into the Matrix to live. He tells Mr. Smith that "ignorance is bliss," and instructs him to return him and make him into someone rich and important within the Matrix. Even though Cypher knows he will be living in a false reality, he prefers it to the unpleasant truth of the "real" reality.

The images of wealth in the media blur **class consciousness**, or awareness of economically rooted social divisions in society. This reinforces the existing hierarchy and hinders social reform (Kottak, 1990). The film *Affluenza* discusses the inconsistency between reality and messages received through the media in America. In the industrialized world, the U.S. ranks first in income discrepancy between the rich and the poor. Despite the fact that Americans carry 1 trillion dollars in personal debt, the media is constantly telling us to buy more and want more. Television and the volume of commercials on it exaggerate our needs and lead to over-consumption.

The classical theories in sociology can help explain the impact and causes of television as an institution, but because the world has changed so dramatically as a result of television, any investigation that does not take into account the impact of it will be incomplete. When considering any sociological phenomenon it is important to use what C. Wright Mills termed, the **sociological imagination**. This type of thinking facilitates our understanding of an individual's "inner life" and "external career," by viewing it within the context of their particular period in history (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Mills instructs sociologists to ask: "How...any particular feature (they) are examining affects, and how is it affected by,

the historical period in which it moves" (Mills, 1959). The **postmodern** era is characterized by an "information economy...consumer capitalism, and economic globalization," all of which have been greatly impacted by television. New cultural patterns related to television have emerged since the 50's. "It is impossible to overestimate the radical effect that this has had on the way our children grow up, the way we live, and the way we conduct our affairs" (Gerbner, 1994). Postmodern sociological theory takes into account the profound effect that mass media have had on us and on how we experience the world and our view of reality.

The very habit of watching TV has modified the collective behavior of Americans. People duplicate inappropriately into other areas of their lives the behavior styles developed while watching TV (Kottak, 1990). The main reason for this misdirection of tele-viewing behavior is that most Americans do something else while watching TV. Some young Americans have trouble reading unless they have background noise because they usually do homework in front of the TV (Kottak, 1990). Many people I know can't fall sleep without the TV on. A specific example happened this semester. My professor was slightly disturbed at the constant flow of students leaving the classroom at various times during a lecture, presumably for a snack or bathroom break. He reminded us that though it appeared that the lecture was one sided, the classroom is a place for an exchange of ideas. The students did not treat the lecture as an interaction, but rather as something they could tune into or out of.

I work with children for a living, and the collective behavior of their generation seems to be similarly, if not more so, affected by television. Television is already priming the next generation of consumers. "For the first time in human history, children are hearing most of the stories, most of the time, not from their parents or school or churches or neighbors, but from a handful of global conglomerates that have something to sell" (Gerbner, 1994). American children and ad-

olescents spend 22 to 28 hours per week viewing television, more than any other activity except sleeping (www.turnoffyourtv.com). With over 300 channels—many of which cater to children, kids are overwhelmed with the choices of what to watch. The constant influx of marketing of products through children's programming is usually reinforced when characters from those shows are used as promotional tools in products. The health of children is also affected by television: the inactivity associated with television and the consumption of its advertised junk food, are both linked to the growing problem of obesity. Television is impacting the behavior of children today as in preceding generations. Watching television has been linked to the growing cases of ADD, it reduces a child's tolerance for stillness and silence, and their ability to structure their own time and deal with boredom (http://www.whitedot.org/issue/iss_front.asp).

The idea that too much television is not good is anything but a novel idea. Since TV's inception there has been criticism. Recently there has been a growing concern to inform the public. The White Dot project is one group that promotes a television free lifestyle. TV Turn Off Week 2006, took place the week of April the 24th. I decided it was important for me to take part in it. What I experienced that week was: more of a life—more free time and more time spent doing things that mattered. As a result I now watch dramatically less television. I know that ideally I should cut television out of my life altogether, but a small minority of what is on is worthy of watching—it is just hidden in the midst of a multitude of refuse and commercials.

The function of television in general is to sell products, but if you do not allow yourself to be sold, then it can undertake the function of entertainment and even education. Now I mute commercials instead of watching them or changing the channel. Public television and channels like HBO do not have formal commercials, though they

do contain advertisements. The key is to become a critical viewer. Now I only watch television if there is something specific I want to watch, because "channel surfing" causes people to watch more than if they chose what they wanted beforehand from a separate source. It is important to keep in mind the ways that it is impacting your behavior, social awareness, and view of reality. Television is not *the* source of truth, or inspiration, and certainly cannot mimic social interaction.

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