Television in/and the Worlds of Today's Children: A Mounting Cultural Controversy

by Richard House — March 23, 2009

This commentary critically reviews current controversies concerning the effects of television in the lives of today's children, specifically locating the place of 'televisual culture' within current debates about so-called 'toxic childhood', and more generally, within wider paradigmatic discussions that question the place of technology within Late and post-modernity.

This week, as I write, two prominent Reuters press reports on the effects of television have highlighted the controversial and mounting concerns about the place of a ubiquitous televisual culture in children's lives. First, we read a summary of a report published in Pediatrics Surveys that finds "TV may do no harm or good to babies," and viewing TV before age two "has no impact on learning ability." This is, of course, a particularly controversial area, with surveys showing around two-thirds of babies under two viewing some screen media on a typical day (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007, pp. 149-151), and the American Academy of Pediatrics' widely reported recommendation that children under two should never watch screen media (Sanders, 1994). Around the same time, Reuters was also reporting "Too much TV linked to higher asthma risk," showing that sedentary behavior associated with TV viewing could cause developmental changes in the lungs, this being the first study to directly link very young sedentary behavior to a higher risk of asthma in later childhood.

These two studies are merely the latest in a growing body of evidence that is beginning to flesh out empirically the kinds of somewhat anecdotal, "from principle" arguments set out in books like Marie Winn's (2002/1973) path-breaking The Plug-in Drug. Such research findings certainly raise all kinds of thorny methodological questions – and not least, the kinds of (often self-fulfilling) assumptions that such empirical, arguably positivistic research routinely makes. A case in point is the question of the time-scale of such research, for another study (cited by the researchers of the report linked to earlier) found that more TV viewing at age three correlated to less verbal ability at age six. In any reputable psychosocial research, it is essential to tease out the underlying metaphysical axioms that inform, and often unwittingly direct, one's conceptualization of the key research questions. One grave danger in this particular field is that televisual technologies have become so culturally ubiquitous and taken-for-granted that they are treated uncritically as a "given" or baseline datum, rather than as a phenomenon that should itself be open to fundamental challenge (see House, 2004) – and this is especially so in the field of early childhood, where parents and adults do still possess the capacity to make clear and informed choices about their young children's environments and associated well-being.

The position of the "activist-academic" that I inhabit on these issues is a far from comfortable one (Hofkins, 2008) – not least because academics are often very suspicious, if not condemnatory, of those of their ilk who engage in public campaigns which commonly involve challenging head-on the governmental policy-making process. In my view, the myth of a value-free, uncommitted, even detached social science was comprehensively undermined way back in the 1970s (House, 2007), so it becomes important, even essential, to be open about one's own, inevitably partial position, so that the reader is able to locate the arguments developed in this Commentary. I write as a professional psychotherapist working from an existential-phenomenological, post-modern and transpersonally informed sensibility, who trained as a Steiner teacher in the late 1990s because of the malaise I was witnessing in children's lives, and the life-long impact that

children's toxic early experience can have. I am particularly concerned about the impact of modern technology, and especially Information and Computer Technologies (ICT), on the psyches and the very being of both children and adults.

Since 2006 I have been directly involved in several public campaigns centred around the issue of so-called "toxic childhood", named after fellow childhood campaigner Sue Palmer's (2006) highly influential book of the same name, – and it was Palmer and I who co-orchestrated the Open Letter on toxic childhood that appeared in the British Daily Telegraph in September 2006 signed by 110 prominent public figures, and which quickly became a major news story across the globe. In that letter, we wrote that

Since children's brains are still developing, they cannot adjust – as full-grown adults can – to the effects of ever more rapid technological and cultural change. They still need what developing human beings have always needed, including… real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives. They also need time… They are pushed by market forces to act and dress like mini-adults and exposed via the electronic media to material which would have been considered unsuitable for children even in the very recent past.

Across the globe a veritable "paradigm war" is now unfolding, centred on childhood, between, on the one hand, a technological "modernity" which, its critics claim, is characterized by one-sided materialism, scientistic and commercial values, a crass utilitarianism, an unquestioned ideology of "progress", and an inability to recognize that children are not "mini-adults," but human beings with a very distinct mode of consciousness and way of being. On the other side of the paradigmatic divide are those, like myself, who believe that children's well-being is being fundamentally compromised by these seemingly inexorable cultural trends, and that there is an urgent need for us to reclaim our own conscious capacity actively to create human culture, rather than being mere passive victims of its noxious vicissitudes.

There are many levels from which the issue of television's influence upon children's experience can be interrogated, all of them important; and I can only address several perspectives in this short piece. Most fundamentally, perhaps, there is the philosophical perspective. Primary experience, gained through the senses, is our most basic way of understanding reality and learning for ourselves. For the late philosopher Edward S. Reed, Cartesian rationalism has 'captured' us scientifically and socially; yet it is direct contact with the world that most significantly influences our development, by helping us develop and refine our interpersonal and physical skill (Reed, 1996). Our hyper-modern technological culture, it is argued, tends to favor the indirect knowledge gained from secondary experience, in which information is selected, amended, packaged, and then presented to us by others, with everyday life becoming ever-more artificial – and with television-viewing perhaps being the paradigm case of such secondary experience.

Reed is joining other cultural critics and researchers like Neil Postman (1992), Barry Sanders (1994), Jane Healy (1990), Aric Sigman (2005), and Baroness Susan Greenfield (2008) who, in their different ways, maintain that unprecedented technological progress has led to a considerable regression in meaningful communication between people. All these authors caution that second-hand experience has become so dominant in our technology-dominated lives that primary experience, and all that goes with it, is under grave threat. They offer, instead, a vision of meaningful learning that places far greater emphasis on unmediated experience, and the necessary messiness of real-life experiential learning. Calling for a better balance between first- and second-

hand experience, for example, Reed argues that without opportunities for direct experiential learning, we will become less likely to think and feel for ourselves. It is fascinating and sobering that long-term empirical research is now beginning to confirm this philosopher's grave prediction, in terms of an observable and marked decline in children's and young people's thinking abilities (Burkhead, 2009; Griffiths, 2006). Reed's work is a development of the telling critique of technology developed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger (1977) and Wade Sikorski (1993); and the observed degradation of authentic play and imaginative thinking are also highly relevant here.

I maintain that the wider cultural perspective on TV-viewing and its all-pervasive neurological, psychological, social, and societal-cultural effects, demands our most urgent attention – and at least some of these wider questions are not at all easily amenable to the kind of positivistic, empiricist research that regrettably dominates the field. As just mentioned, there are increasing reports in the literature of unexpected long-term declines in both children's competencies in certain key areas, and in higher-education students' thinking abilities; and in her book *The Plug-in Drug*, Winn (2002/1973) quotes highly suggestive evidence strongly suggesting some kind of causal relationship between the rise of TV-viewing in the USA from the 1950s onwards, and notable and otherwise difficult-to-explain declines in standardized test scores amongst American youth (pp. 285–288).

Touching in these issues, cultural commentator Carl Honoré (2008), in his new book *Under Pressure*, writes that

Endless channel-hopping... militate[s] against the slower art of delving into a topic, staying with an argument long enough to unravel its nuances and complexities... University professors increasingly complain that twenty-first century students balk at reading whole books... They also seem impatient with ambiguity, demanding instant answers that are black and white.... Can democracy function properly if young voters want every issue wrapped up in text-message-style soundbites? (p. 117)

Can we, finally, lay responsibility for these disturbing educational and cultural trends at the feet of the ubiquitous television? – or is TV merely one instance of a wider, routinely uncritical, and non self-reflexive "technology toxicity" that now seems to be having measurable negative learning effects on our children? These are the kinds of prescient questions that researchers, educationalists, cultural commentators, and philosophers urgently need to address if we are to make healthy and informed steps towards consciously chosen, people-sensitive, and humanity-enabling technology (see Freenberg, 1995), rather than allowing an increasingly run-away technology to dominate humankind in the "man-becoming-machine" age of Late Modernity? To end on a controversial note, it may well take a full consideration of the spiritual and the transpersonal dimension to achieve this essential engagement in and around technology in Late Modernity (Grifin, 1988); and in that eventuality, even those who are sceptical about the spiritual dimension may have to begin to take it seriously – and certainly if it proves to be the only viable way out of our current technological caught-upness and – arguably – spirals of cultural decline.

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