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TELEVISION: THE NEW OPTIUM OF THE PEOPLE

MAURICE WOODS

Much has been said about the influence of TV on people, not enough about the influence of people on TV. People get the TV they deserve, just as they get the Government they deserve. In future they may get both in the same parcel.

For TV is an all-purpose drug. It can wake people up and it can send them to sleep. It could be the most powerful political awakener since the bicycle took revolution to Africa, or it could turn us into pigs and let Circe rule the island.

The dangers advertise themselves as loudly as any commercial. Among the most insistant is the possility that TV will enable the majority to tyrannise even more effectively than now. The very

fact that men own TV sets enlarges this fear: Hungry men do not make a thoughtful opposition, but at least they make an opposition: those who are having it good can be persuaded to praise God from whom all consumer goods flow. But a TV set is not merely a possession; it is part of the apparatus of persuasion. It is a powerful preacher of the doctrine that material prosperity is an end in itself. Too firm believers in this doctrine are not troubled by Lenin's question "Who, whom?" So long as it pays them they are content to be whom, leaving the business of being who to the majority their votes keep in power.

It is not, of course, a new problem. Only the TV is

new. The problem is at least as old as the Greeks. In our time it is at least as old as John Stuart Mill, who might have been foreseeing televised culture when he grew perturbed at the power of collective mediocrity. What you may ask, is wrong with collective mediocrity? Has there ever been a time when popular culture rose above the mediocre? The point is that the culture purveyed by the TV set is not popular culture in the sense of having sprung from the people. It has been given to the people as the lowest common denominator of their fantasies.

Men's attitudes are immeasurable. Their opinions do not change as visibly as litmus paper. It must be many years before anyone can make even a guess at the extent to which TV alters the political life of a nation. Its effect on the adult mind can at present only be inferred from the more precise work done with children. The report brought out by H. T. Himmelweit in 1958 on "Television and the Child" made the positive assertion that TV influences the way children think and

the judgments they make. It is safe to assume that the adult does not go wholly unscathed. Assuming, then, that thoughts and judgments are affected, it is permissible to guess that thoughts become compressed within limits set by the communicators, and judgments brought into line with those favoured by the majority.

The tendency, in fact, is to produce conformity of thought and feeling in a society which can be democratic only so long as a fruitful interplay of conflicting thoughts and feelings is encouraged. The moment the original thinker becomes a laughing-stock, or the rebel an outcast, tyranny is on the way in. This is not conjecture, but experience. The brief but bateful triumph of McCarthyism in the United States is a case in point. Galloping conformism brought American democracy almost to its death-bed. The patient's constitution was sound, and it survived: would its recovery have been so swift if thoughts and feelings had lain-congealed in a national mould for several decades? If there had been se-

veral decades, instead of several years, of TV?

Less spectacularly, the habit of conforming with conventional attitudes could give conservatism virtually perpetual ascendancy in any country. Conservatism demands no thought, simply obedience. As an instrument for suppressing thought, other than the thoughts doled out for public acceptance, TV has the advantages of an established and unchallengeable Church.

There are gleaming examples of the immunity of pre-TV democracies to unseen propagandists. One of the distinguishing marks of a democracy is its willingness to allow its citizens to listen to any half-truths from any source, knowing that the mental sinews strengthened by debate will be strong enough to resist. It was not only confidence in the patriotism of soldiers and civilians which gave Lord Haw-Haw the freedom of the wartime air. Hearts were judged to be right, but heads were also known to have been screwed on firmly by the democratic habit of

weighing and selecting arguments.

Totalitarian regimes cannot expose their people to opposing views, because the beliefs sustaining totalitarianism are mere lodgers in the individual's mind. They have not grown there: they have been put there. So long as nothing disturbs them, the regime is safe. The attitudes likely to be built up in the democratic citizen by years of watching TV bear some resemblance to the beliefs of a totalitarian society. The uncritical assimilation of ideas presented on behalf of the majority could wither the faculty of judgment and prevent that radical re-examination of society on which democracies rely for their periodic rejuvenation.

We can still doubt whether TV is having this effect on the electorate. We cannot doubt that it is having an uncanny effect on politicians. They regard it as a potent means of enticing voters on to the hook. It has never mattered much to politicians how the voter is hooked, so long as they can land him. If reason serves, reason will be employed: if not, promis-

es, flattery and fervour will do as well. These ancient devices are a legacy of the hustings. TV has devices of its own. What worked well on a platform with a brass band, with mass emotion, opportunist oratory and spontaneous repartee, does not work at all when the suppliant is in a box by the fireside, addressing a family trapped between the cowboys and the quiz. A policy or a party image must be sold, as other merchandise is sold. The politicians now have schools to teach them slickness.

The cardinal rule is to divert attention from hard facts to delectable fancies. Hair-cream is not sold by mentioning its popularity among dustmen. It has to be associated with ambition. The young man with the shining mane has a car which he could only have bought out of an enormous salary, he is pestered by beautiful girls, and his social status is rising. What they are selling is not hair-cream but a lucky charm. The appeal is not to reason, but to a submerged reverence for magic which is inimical to democracy, yet is

now being played upon more forcefully than was possible before TV was invented.

Cleverly handled, the medium is capable of conferring a halo on the shoddiest consortium of careerist nobodies. The party likeliest to win in an election would be the one with the least respect for the truth. At best, a television campaign could so befuddle the voter that he failed to distinguish the honest men from the knaves. Not that there would be much incentive to honesty, when rewards went to the underhanded. Yet even this is not the greatest peril. A party which merely used the screen to hypnotise the electorate into accepting its policies might still have sound policies to offer: the real fear is that the parties might grow to look like their own picture of themselves.

That is the pessimistic prospect. There is also an optimistic prospect. For TV could yet have precisely the opposite effect. The free mind has surely not outlived centuries of subversion and intimidation to be ensnared so easily by this new instrument of conformism. Once

the public learns the rules, once discrimination sets in, the individual is just as capable of using the communicators as the communicator of using the individual.

The world's agonies are delivered daily to the living-room. Statesmen who were once blurred photographs in newspapers squat in the corner and are scrutinised. Science has hopped out of the unopened text-book and displays itself as a living force. Art imposes itself on the notice of people who never entered a gallery. There are few human activities concerning which some information, however processed, does not percolate to minds hitherto unreceptive. Are we to be so misanthropic as to deny that the public will make good use of this information?

By making two blades of knowledge grow where only one grew before, TV has the power to enlarge the meaning of the phrase "informed public opinion". Hitherto only a small section of the

electorate could lay claim to independence of thought, for independence rests on knowledge. The more knowledge the ordinary man acquires, the greater his capacity to question the opinions and attitudes forced upon him. TV thus has the paradoxical ability to defeat itself, at its own game, to keep at bay the majority dictatorship which threatens to arise in a self-satisfied and unthinking democracy.

Indeed, instead of being the new opium of the people, TV will probably turn out to be a political alarm-clock. The gloomy view is tempting in this first decade of its reign, but if we remember that the viewers are maturing all the time, absorbing unfamiliar facts, seeing through false personalities, detecting the aces hidden up sleeves, the next decade looks promising. Whatever its ultimate effect on social and political attitudes there can be no hating an invention which makes people interested in the world's affair.—*Contemporary Review*.