Television Addiction

MARIE WINN

We hear a great deal these days about different forms of addiction, but we don't usually think of our television viewing habits as a form of addiction. However, Marie Winn, who was born in Czechoslovakia and educated at Radcliffe, suggests just that in her book Television: The Plug-in Drug. This reading selection, in which Winn defines television addiction, was taken from that book.

he word “addiction” is often used loosely and wryly in conversation. People will refer to themselves as “mystery book addicts” or “cookie addicts.” E. B. White writes of his annual surge of interest in gardening: “We are hooked and are making an attempt to kick the habit.” Yet nobody really believes that reading mysteries or ordering seeds by catalogue is serious enough to be compared with addictions to heroin or alcohol. The word “addiction” is here used jokingly to denote a tendency to overindulge in some pleasurable activity.

People often refer to being “hooked on TV.” Does this, too, fall into the lighthearted category of cookie eating and other pleasures that people pursue with unusual intensity, or is there a kind of television viewing that falls into the more serious category of destructive addiction?

When we think about addiction to drugs or alcohol, we frequently focus on negative aspects, ignoring the pleasures that accompany drinking or drug-taking. And yet the essence of any serious addiction is a pursuit of pleasure, a search for a “high” that normal life does not supply. It is only the inability to function without the addictive substance that is dismaying, the dependence of the organism upon a certain experience and an increasing inability to function normally without it. Thus a person will take two or three drinks at the end of the day not merely for the pleasure drinking provides, but also because he “doesn’t feel normal” without them.

Real addicts do not merely pursue a pleasurable experience one time in order to function normally. They need to repeat it again and again. Something about that particular experience makes life without it less than complete. Other potentially pleasurable experiences are no longer possible, for under the spell of the addictive experience, their lives are peculiarly distorted. The addict craves an experience and yet is never really satisfied. The organism may be temporarily satiated, but soon it begins to crave again.

Finally a serious addiction is distinguished from a harmless pursuit of pleasure by its distinctly destructive elements. Heroin addicts, for instance, lead damaged lives: their increasing need for heroin in increasing doses prevents them from working, from maintaining relationships, from developing in human ways. Similarly alcoholics’ lives are narrowed and dehumanized by their dependence on alcohol.

Let us consider television viewing in the light of the conditions that define serious addictions.

Not unlike drugs or alcohol, the television experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state. The worries and anxieties of reality are as effectively deferred by becoming absorbed in a television program as by going on a “trip” induced by drugs or alcohol. And just as alcoholics are only vaguely
aware of their addiction, feeling that they control their drinking more than they really do ("I can cut it out any time I want—I just like to have three or four drinks before dinner"), people similarly overestimate their control over television watching. Even as they put off other activities to spend hour after hour watching television, they feel they could easily resume living in a different, less passive style. But somehow or other while the television set is present in their homes, the click doesn’t sound. With television pleasures available, those other experiences seem less attractive, more difficult somehow:

A heavy viewer (a college English instructor) observes: "I find television almost irresistible. When the set is on, I cannot ignore it. I can’t turn it off. I feel sapped, will-less, enervated. As I reach out to turn off the set, the strength goes out of my arms. So I sit there for hours and hours."

Self-confessed television addicts often feel they “ought” to do other things—but the fact that they don’t read and don’t plant their garden or sew or crochet or play games or have conversations means that those activities are no longer as desirable as television viewing. In a way the lives of heavy viewers are as imbalanced by their television “habit” as a drug addict’s or an alcoholic’s. They are living in a holding pattern, as it were, passing up the activities that lead to growth or development or a sense of accomplishment. This is one reason people talk about their television viewing so ruefully, so apologetically. They are aware that it is an unproductive experience, that almost any other endeavor is more worthwhile by any human measure.

Finally it is the adverse effect of television viewing on the lives of so many people that defines it as a serious addiction. The television habit distorts the sense of time. It renders other experiences vague and curiously unreal while taking on a greater reality for itself. It weakens relationships by reducing and sometimes eliminating normal opportunities for talking, for communicating.

And yet television does not satisfy, else why would the viewer continue to watch hour after hour, day after day? "The measure of health," writes Lawrence Kubie, "is flexibility . . . and especially the freedom to cease when sated." But heavy television viewers can never be sated with their television experiences—these do not provide the true nourishment that satiation requires—and thus they find that they cannot stop watching.

*Lawrence Kubie, Neurotic Distortion and the Creative Process (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1938).
Don't Touch That Dial

MADELINE DREXLER

Free-lance writer Madeline Drexler published the following analysis of the effects of television viewing in the Boston Globe. In contrast to Marie Winn in the previous essay, Drexler believes that television can have a positive influence on its viewers—even on child viewers.

Television acts as a narcotic on children—mesmerizing them, stunting their ability to think, and displacing such wholesome activities as book reading and family discussions. Right?

Wrong, says researcher Daniel Anderson, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Anderson doesn’t have any particular affection for Garfield and Friends, MTV clips, or Gilligan’s Island reruns. But he does believe it’s important to distinguish television’s impact on children from influences of the family and the wider culture. We tend to blame TV he says, for problems it doesn’t really cause. In the process, we overlook our own roles in shaping children’s minds.

One conventional belief about television is that it impairs a child’s ability to think and to interpret the world. But Anderson’s own research and reviews of the scientific literature discredit this assumption. While watching TV, children do not merely absorb words and images. Instead, they muse upon the meaning of what they see, its plausibility, and its implications for the future—whether they’ve tuned in to a news report of a natural disaster or an action show. Because television relies on such cinematic techniques as montage and crosscutting, children learn early how to draw inferences about the passage of time, character psychology, and implied events. Even preschoolers comprehend more than just the information supplied on the tube.

Another contention about television is that it displaces reading as a form of entertainment. But according to Anderson, the amount of time spent watching television is not related to reading ability. For one thing, TV doesn’t take the place of reading for most children; it takes the place of similar sorts of recreation, such as going to the movies, reading comic books, listening to the radio, and playing sports. Variables such as socio-economic status and parents’ educational background exert a far stronger influence on a child’s reading. “Far and away,” Anderson says, “the best predictor of reading ability, and of how much a child reads, is how much a parent reads.”

Conventional wisdom has it that heavy television-watching lowers IQ scores and hinders school performance. Since the 1960s, SAT scores have dropped, along with state and national assessments of educational achievement. But here, too, Anderson notes that no studies have linked prolonged television exposure in childhood to lower IQ later on. In fact, research suggests that it’s the other way around. Early IQ predicts how much TV an older child will watch. “If you’re smart young, you’ll watch less TV when you’re older,” Anderson says. Conversely, in the same self-selecting process, people of lower IQ tend to be lifelong television devotees.
When parents watch TV with their young children, explaining new words and ideas to them, the children comprehend far more than they would if they were watching alone. This is due partly to the fact that when kids expect that TV will require thought, they spend more time thinking. What's ironic is that most parents use an educational program as an opportunity to park their kids in front of the set and do something in another room. "Even for parents who are generally wary of television," Anderson says, "Sesame Street is considered a show where it's perfectly okay to leave a child alone." The program was actually intended to be viewed by parents and children together, he says.

Because our attitudes inform TV viewing, Anderson applauds the nascent trend of offering high school courses that teach students how to "decode" television. In these classes, students learn to analyze the persuasive techniques of commercials, compare the reality of crime to its dramatic portrayal, inquire into the economics of broadcasting, and understand the mechanics of TV production. Such courses, Anderson contends, teach the kind of critical thinking central to the purpose of education. "Kids can be taught as much about television as about text or computers," he says.

If anything, Anderson's views underscore the fact that television cannot be disparaged in isolation from larger forces. For years researchers have attempted to show that television is inherently dangerous to children, hypnotizing them with its movement and color, cutting their attention span with its fast-paced, disconnected images, curbing intellectual development, and taking the place of loftier pastimes.

By showing that television promotes none of these effects, Anderson intends to shift the discussion to the real issue: content. That, of course, is a thornier discussion. How should our society judge the violence of primetime shows? The sexism of MTV? The materialism of commercials? "I feel television is almost surely having a major social impact on the kids, as opposed to a cognitive impact," Anderson says.

In this context, he offers some advice to parents. First, "Parents should think of their kids as actively absorbing everything on television. They are not just passively mesmerized—in one eye and out the other. Some things on TV are probably good for children to watch, like educational TV, and some things are bad."

Second, "If you think your kid is spending lots of time watching television, think about what alternatives there are, from the child's point of view." Does a youngster have too much free time? Are there books, toys, games, or playmates around? "A lot of the time, kids watch TV as a default activity: There's nothing else to do."
Finally, "If a child persists in watching too much television, the question is why. It's rare that TV shows are themselves so entertaining." More often than not, the motive is escapism. A teen-ager may be uncomfortable with his or her peers; a child may want to retreat from a home torn by marital strife; there may be problems at school.

For children, as for adults, television can be a source of enlightenment or a descent into mindlessness—depending mostly on the choices of lucre-driven executives. But as viewers, we can't ignore what we ourselves bring to the medium.