

THE “HOT IRON” OF TELEVISION

Part of the Family

“It’s a virtual family member. It demands attention through manipulative and often seductive behavior. It’s voice and music join the household at mealtimes, bedtime and relaxing time. It often becomes the center of attention after visitors arrive. It introduces its own liberal viewpoint into the home and is outspoken most of the time. It is a demanding family member often changing schedules on shopping times, sleeping patterns and conversations between household members. Its influence dominates all others in the family.”^[1]

Individuals would be loath to invite seductive, cursing, slapstick guests into the home. We would be horrified to have our children sit at the feet of rapists, murderers, thieves to learn of their values in life. Yet, this virtual family member provides just that influence seven hours each day.

Does all this debauchery, fantasy and contemptible influence affect the values in the home? Is this a searing hot iron on the integrity of the family? Consider this: Most homes now contain three or more TVs. 54% of children have their own bedroom sets. Only 30% of children say their families have rules prohibiting their watching particular shows. Forty percent that do, say they watch them anyway. The average American child now spends nearly four hours/day watching TV. The average teenager will spend more time watching TV than in school during those transitional years. By the time a person dies, he will have spent more time watching TV than working at all jobs.^[2]

Question: Given the time people spend in front of the TV, can one really believe it is not influencing the moral tone of the person? If this compromised entertainment is part of our daily fare, will it appeal to the higher nature where God seeks to influence our minds? Or, will it naturally appeal to the sinful nature?

Concern over the influence of television became an issue in the 1940s. Early studies suggested TV hurts the mind, erodes family life and could eventually threaten civilization. In 1961 Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, observed that television was a “vast wasteland.”^[3]

By then the Surgeon General, Jesse Steinfeld, had begun an in-depth review of the influence TV had on children. He published the Surgeon General’s 1972 report on *Television and Social Behavior*. Eli Rubinstein, a member of the task force that helped Jesse Steinfeld, said, “The vast majority of the studies confirm the original conclusion that there is a casual relationship between televised violence and later aggression.” Because of what was found, Steinfeld called for “appropriate remedial action by broadcasters to halt violence in children’s programming.”^[4]



There were more than violence concerns that came out of the Surgeon General's report. Children saw a discrepant view of the world. The role of the sexes was deviant, the coveted jobs in society were there to take, and good verses bad was played out in negative stereotypes toward the elderly – all simply did not match the real world.[5]

In 1974 the Readers Digest published an article that condensed an investigative report from U.S. News and World Report. "Question of the influence that affects the development of a child today, where would you place television? Answer: Next to the mother and father – and far ahead of school and church." [6]

A 1973 Roper Survey had found "that television is considered by Americans to be the most believable of all mass media" [7]

"Television programs face a continuing dilemma. To hold an audience, they must evoke human feelings, stir human emotions, engage human passions." [8]

The family, violence and children were the early focus. But then a change came in understanding how TV can have serious damaging effects on the mind.

"Reciprocal inhibition is a technical term describing this way of reacting with divided attention. It is often deliberately taught in psychological laboratories and consulting rooms as a technique for bringing about systematic desensitization. It can be done with electric shock; it can be done with images. The procedure using images and fantasy materials to extinguish emotions and excise feelings is called imaginal desensitization.

"Imaginal desensitization is effective in whittling away at emotions until a person can remain relaxed, undisturbed and unmoved even while watching scenes that had originally raised gravest concern, acutest distress or most painful anxiety. Those who practice the technique claim that the resultant emotionless state becomes generalized so that when a person trained in imaginal desensitization comes upon scenes in real life that are the same or similar to those seen over and over again as imaginary dramas, he or she can even then continue to remain detached and unmoved by them.

"Dramatizations are effective aides to emotional reeducation: psychodrama, sociodrama, role taking, role reversals. They provide opportunities for rehearsal and repetition, allowing new associations to entrench themselves more securely as old ones are shed....

"Systematic imaginal desensitization chips away at feelings and emotions people's pasts have taught them to attach to images, symbols, relationships, events. Repeated and routinized reinforcement shows them, as old emotional ties are extinguished, how to reattach their feelings to new ones. Consciousness is raised through rehearsal in imagination of dramatic role-playing socially shared. In the clinical situation, these procedures are called behavior modification. The parallel to the broadcast materials TV brings into the home and the circumstances under which people admit them is exact." [9]

The moral conscience is changed through desensitization. Access to human feelings is through imaginations. Here, with art, poetry, drama, dance, story, games and ritual, the very

foundation that forms the character of the mind is gently challenged with each repetition. The values of the past are replaced with the sensuous influence of the virtual family member so subtly, the changes are not noticed.

The following year this was addressed in a letter from the president of one of the world's largest advertisement agencies:

"The impact of mass communications on the mental health of this country is a subject of vital interest to us at the J. Walter Thompson Company, and we share Professor Somers' concern. For the past seven months we have shown to a number of audiences, including our own clients, a presentation entitled 'The Desensitization of America' that deals largely with media violence and media sexuality – and the inflationary market in both. Shock has become a marketable commodity with its own law of diminishing returns. The result is ever increasing levels of shock in an attempt to attract the attention of an increasingly desensitized public.

"We are alarmed. We are opposed to the exploitation of violence and sex in all media, because we are convinced that such exploitation is damaging, particularly to the young growing up in an already difficult time. We have communicated our alarm to various business and media groups as well as to our clients and have received a good deal of support for our stand."^[10]

Destroying the Conscience

Debates continue over the "direct" effect TV has on violence and aggressive behavior. But past social restraints are being replaced with hardened sensuous appeals to please one's self. Change in the very nature of man's thinking has occurred, cherished values and how we process ethical concerns has altered our judgment. If the appeal of TV is to the lower nature – our sinful nature – then that influence reinforces that nature. This impedes the work of the Holy Spirit. Discernment of spiritual matters is blunted, and sin ceases to appear wrong.

This principle was addressed by E. G. White years ago: "The first resistance to the Spirit's pleading prepares the way for the second resistance. Thus the heart is hardened, and the conscience seared."^[11] Paul, in writing to Timothy, prophesied that such damage would occur to individuals in the last days. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; *having their conscience seared with a hot iron.*" I Timothy 4:1, 2.

The mind changing influence of being entertained by sin decreases our sensitivity to right. "Though formed in the image of his Maker, man can so educate his mind that sin which he once loathed will become pleasant to him."^[12] "Familiarity with sin inevitably causes it to appear less repulsive. He who chooses to associate with the servants of Satan soon cease to fear their master."^[13]

We have known about this principle, but in blindness, few Christians have applied it to television. Now secular minds are sharing their deep concern that TV is a demoralizing force in the homes of most Americans. Murder is becoming respectable. Sexual words and acts occur right in the living room – often with children present.

In 1997 a degrading change was introduced into TV entertainment. Vulgarity at alarming levels was ratcheted up. Though broadcast standards kept things in a semblance of being checked in the past, all language is now game. Can Christians afford to be around such language let alone permit it to be home entertainment? Tom Sherak, chairman of the 20th Century Fox Domestic Film Group, said, "We are in a creative business ... The creative element has to be allowed to make the movie they want to make. The one thing you don't want to do is hurt the integrity of the movie."^[14] Mr. Sherak, what about hurting the integrity of the minds of children and adults?

There is a hypocritical rating policed by the industry that needs policing itself. It is based on adult verses family verses children viewing standards. What is the difference? If Christian minds are to become more pure, more like Jesus, who never fell even by a thought, no rating system can set standards for God's people. It is foolish and risking eternity to justify watching TV because one is "older" or an "adult." Christians tend to justify movies because it was a "true" story or it was filled with educational "history" or there were "religious" lessons taught. Satan will appear, also, as an angel of light. Do we want to sit at his feet because he quotes many of the words of Jesus?

Mr. Sherak was concerned about preserving creativity. The usual murder scenes are not enough today. Recently, Southern Illinois University studied vulgarity and violence. They observed a CBS drama that opened with a scene of a father crushing the skull of his young daughter with a shovel. A Fox drama, Mr. Sherak's personal creative channel, featured a man buried alive in a bag containing other human body parts.

In 75% of all TV violence the perpetrators go unpunished. The average American now watches 14,000 TV references to sex every year. Howard Stern has promised to have live sex on his show, nudity and lesbians acting out. "Standards have gone down to an all-time low, and I'm here to represent it."^[15]

TV Divides the Family

The Center for Media and Public Affairs said one group of 15-year olds in Seattle, Washington, have "Dawson's Creek" watching parties.^[16]

The Catholic Church began to posture last year regarding the demoralizing changes coming over television. On simply the family issues, this observation was made:

"It also seems as if parents are almost always absent from young peoples' lives in these shows. And when they do appear, they're often portrayed as stupid, deceitful, cruel or simply impossible to relate to.

"A lot of this starts with the companies that market their products to teens. They want to create a teen market detached from the adult market. Once you sell products that way, you know, 'Don't let your parents know what your wants are – you can buy it for yourself,' the entertainment companies then also have to produce shows that complement those commercial messages. That means they have to show a teen world that it has its own values and its own monies, totally apart from adult values and monies.

“Dawson’s Creek,’ for example, which teen-agers seem to love, has all these absent parents, parents who are adulterers or in jail. The parents are always saying stupid things that annoy the teen-agers. Occasionally you’ll see a grandparent being wise because they are harmless and don’t inflict any discipline, but otherwise all these teens are on their own. The message of these TV shows is that adults are either oppressive – they try to make you adhere to old-fashioned rules that make no sense – or they are irrelevant. It’s a vision of a world that would be a much better place if teen-agers ran it.”^[17]

The pope recently addressed 150,000 people in St. Peters Square in the pouring rain. He pled for the family and demanded “Put children first.”

An Excuse to Restrict Freedom

Earlier this year a significant report came in the *National Catholic Register* looking at sex and violence on TV.

“The parents Television Council released a study at the press conference titled “What a Difference a Decade Makes,” which compares the first four weeks of the 1989-1990 TV season with the first four weeks of the 1999-2000 season.

“Compared to 10 years ago, prime-time violence is down nearly 15%. However, the number of sexual references and vulgar language fairly skyrocketed, the study shows.

“The average number of sexual references per hour of prime time more than tripled. Only one network, CBS, was down slightly. And given that the WB and UPN networks didn’t even exist a decade ago, the total number of sexual references on network TV is even higher.

“Ten years ago, oral sex didn’t get one mention; this season, it got 20 references over the 235.5 hours of prime time studied. References to pornography quadrupled, and even higher increases were found for references to genital sex, kinky sex and masturbation. References to homosexual sex shot up a whopping 2,650%, according to the study.

“The numbers for foul language are similarly bleak. In 1989 CBS was the foul-language leader, but because foul language increased fivefold over the past 10 years, CBS’ 1989 numbers would have trailed the pack in 1999.

“The use of every kind of vulgar word was up substantially from decade to decade. And some terms too vulgar to print here that weren’t uttered at all on TV in 1989 were used with double-digit frequency over the first four weeks of the new season.

“Catholic entertainer Steve Allen, the honorary chairman of the Parents Television Council, has been seen in full-page ads from the council decrying the ‘moral sewer’ of today’s TV in an estimated 900 newspapers.

“At the press conference, Allen said, ‘Everybody wants freedom. Everybody wants law and order.’ But the two cannot be harmonized, he added.

“Every law, including the 10 wisest laws that were ever passed’ – the Ten Commandments – ‘were placing limits on freedom,’ Allen said.”[\[18\]](#)

Do you see where this is going? Some aren’t afraid to address the issues. Part of the answer will be to restrict freedom for the *common good*. For social stability, a need for behaviors to be confined to certain moral parameters will be seen. And who will define those parameters? The most powerful churches.

Appeal for a Higher Standard

As our church began, modern conveniences and technology was virtually nonexistent. Television was unknown. Does that justify its unbridled use? The principles of right are higher than anything man devises. God craves to penetrate our thinking with the pure character He displayed through Jesus. He is our standard. He is the One who every thought and action is to be tested against.

The motion picture came into being in the late 1800s. Theaters soon followed. The films were mild compared to what we see today. Yet, God saw that the influences of the theater was wrong. He led E. G. White to pen:

“Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure is the theater. Instead of being a school for morality and virtue, as is so often claimed, it is the very hotbed of immorality. Vicious habits and sinful propensities are strengthened and confirmed by these entertainments. Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes deprave the imagination and debase the morals. Every youth who habitually attends such exhibitions will be corrupted in principle. There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life than theatrical amusements. The love for these scenes increases with every indulgence as the desire for intoxicating drink strengthens with its use. The only safe course is to shun the theater, the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement.”[\[19\]](#)

Does that sound legalistic or harsh? God has an ideal. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” Philippians 2:5. He wants our attention turned from pleasing self to honoring Him and those about us. The atmosphere of the theater and the circus has entertainment that is sinful and detracts from Him.

Little do we grasp how sensitive this whole issue is. “Our own words have an effect upon our character, but they act still more powerfully upon the characters of others.”[\[20\]](#)

If our own words affect our character and the words of others more powerfully, how does it elevate when we seek entertainment from those who fear not God; who dress, joke and speak tritely about life?

“Do not permit upon your tables the magazines and newspapers in which are found love stories. Supply their place with books that will help the youth to put into their character building the very best material – the love and fear of God, the knowledge of Christ. Encourage your

children to store the mind with valuable knowledge, to let that which is good occupy the soul and control its powers, leaving no place for low, debasing thoughts. Restrict the desire for reading matter that does not furnish good food for the mind. The money expended for story magazines may not seem much, but it is too much to spend for that which gives so much that is misleading and so little that is good in return.”[21]

It is little things that will bring the searing hot iron to the conscience by things that appear trivial – like a piece of fruit in the Garden of Eden. Eternity will be won or lost by many on issues that seemed too small to matter but, in fact, were too large for God ignore.

The desensitizing of the mind to right is a sign of the last days (I Timothy 4:1,2). It is also a sign of apostasy among God’s people. In the compilation book, *The Adventist Home*, a chapter is called “The Portals We Must Watch.” Within its wonderful counsel is this thought:

“Everything that can be done should be done to place ourselves and our children where we shall not see the iniquity that is practiced in the world. We should carefully guard the sight of our eyes and the hearing of our ears so that these awful things shall not enter our minds. When the daily newspaper comes into the house, I feel as if I want to hide it, that the ridiculous, sensational things in it may not be seen. It seems as if the enemy is at the foundation of the publishing of many things that appear in newspapers. Every sinful thing that can be found is uncovered and laid bare before the world.”[22]

Making Time for God

Maybe our greatest need is to understand what sin is and penetrate deeper and deeper into the high ideals our Savior wants for us. And that leads us to an issue that pains the heart of God. There seems to be little interest or time to study God’s word. Our day is so full. Prayer is neglected, and God is mocked by our inattention as we claim to be Christians. But, we did have time for TV. Imagine how excited God would be if we prayed 30 minutes each day instead of watching TV for half an hour. Think of how grateful He would be if we spent one hour in His word instead of watching TV for one hour! But studies show we watch TV for four to seven hours each day. By the time we die it could be written on the average American tombstone: “He honored self by spending 13 years watching TV!”

“Time is very precious. Days and weeks and months are filling up the year; and as they pass, we have one day, one week, one month, less in which to prepare for the future life. Yet thousands are lingering in careless and heedless indifference, feeling no need of bearing responsibilities, spending their precious time as if it were of no value. This pleasure, this excursion, they say, will pass away time. This is not the true view of life. Time is a precious talent, for which they must render an account to God.”[23]

“You have no time to devote to the theater or the dance hall. You have no time to grumble. It is lost, lost. You have no time to play cards. You have no time to attend horse



racers. You have no time to attend shows. How is it with my soul? ... Have I a living connection with God? If I have, I must seek to win these souls that are attracted with these outward pleasures. Satan has managed it. Satan has devised it that one pleasure should crowd on the heels of another, a feverish excitement. No time to contemplate God, no time to think of heaven or heavenly things, no time to study the Bible, no time to put forth interested efforts for those that are out of Christ.”[24]

Will watching TV appeal to our higher nature where God seeks to gain entry? Or, will watching television appeal to the lower nature?

To God’s people wanting translation, craving to be eternally with Him, television appears to be antithetic to preparing for God’s kingdom. It’s portals trifle with Satan. God wants our minds to penetrate the wonders of His character. In the great restorative plan, provision has been made to thrill with discovering new and elevating themes into His love. He has provided in prayer and study a way for His Spirit to enter our hearts. Divinity and humanity can once again pulsate together.

Those preparing for heaven have the elevated opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus, to learn from Him and to see unfolded a panorama of the final drama between Christ and Satan. There we have the privilege of observing the theater of His grace.

We have barely enough time left to be ready for His return. I want my residual moments used in growing closer to His likeness. I hope you do too!

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