

THE RT. HON. LORD HILL OF LUTON

## THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION

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**F**OR MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS after man evolved on this planet, communication was by word of mouth, direct and face to face. Later, man's thoughts could be preserved in written form—inscribed on stone, on clay and on papyrus, but the communication was limited to a privileged, literate few; the mass of the people remained illiterate. Then came the printing press and the wider spread of communication. But although the printing press was invented centuries ago the institutional reaction of society was delayed.

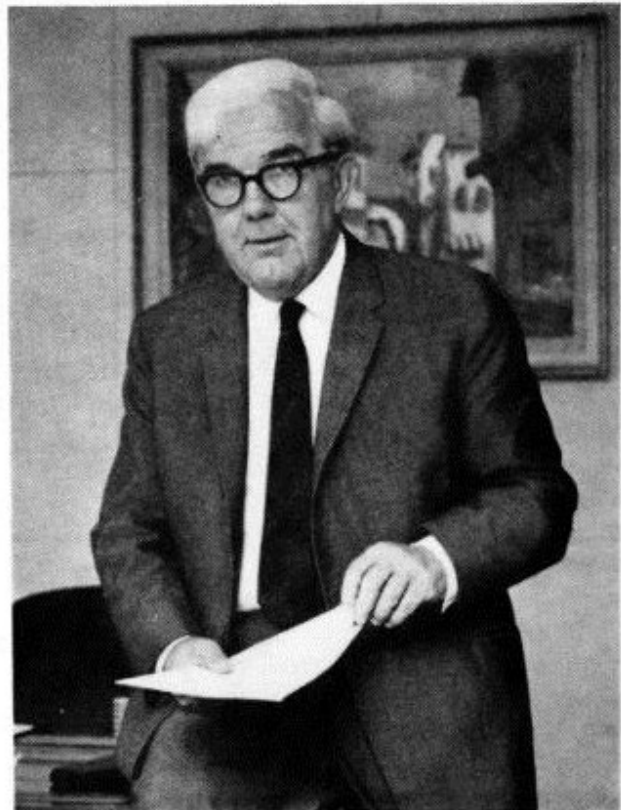
Only in 1870 was universal primary education introduced in Britain, and universal secondary schooling came only at the end of the Second World War. These were the possibilities. But man is seldom equal to his ability to avail himself of, or make full use of, the provisions within society or the potentialities within himself.

For most of mankind, the natural mode of communication is verbal, immediate and visual. Illiteracy is the natural state. But now technology has put at the disposal of everybody a means of communication which accords with fundamental human need and which destroys the constraints of distance and time. There is no need to struggle, as the majority do, with the interpretation of the written word, it is pre-translated into the audio/visual mode and communicated directly into the home. Under the influence of television, the world is shrinking and the relative

importance of the real issues confronting mankind becomes obvious through the immediacy of the message.

More time is spent watching television than in any

*I.T.A. Picture*



other 'waking' activity. In Britain, 20 million people watch more than four hours of television nightly. It is the primary source of relaxation, entertainment and information to the vast majority of the population. It may be decried or acclaimed—but it cannot be ignored. The output is so vast that it can only conveniently be considered under the broad headings of information, education and entertainment, although these categories overlap; one man's education may be another's relaxation.

Information means news and current affairs. Television and the press are not mutually exclusive. The immediacy of television is no substitute for the printed word which can be pondered on, re-read and preserved. One complements the other—and provides an abundance of news for the other. The long-term social effects of this change in public information are near impossible to judge, but it is worth remembering that about one-fifth of the total output of television is made up of news, news magazines, documentaries and other informative material, and encompasses, in its audience, those with scant access to the written word.

In education, the full impact of television has yet to be felt. For schools it will likely take second place to closed-circuit installations. Formal education and instruction depend to such a great extent on the efforts and skill of the teacher, using whatever aids are to hand, that the closer control of a local closed-circuit system, tailor-made to regional educational needs, and combined with easy and frequent discussion, can have advantages over national broadcasting. However, even in these densely populated islands, not all communities and educational areas are so compact that they can make use of closed-circuit systems.

The present generation accept television as a primary mode of communication; it is no longer the mystery and marvel it appears to those who witnessed its beginnings, who still accept the printed word as the primary medium of mass communication. It is impossible to exclude television from education, preparation for life, as it was impossible to exclude books after the invention of the printing press.

What can television offer in the field of post-school, or adult, education. If adult education means to counteract the deficiencies of earlier instruction and satisfy the needs and interests of adulthood, the topics can range from how to boil an egg to post-graduate medicine. In appreciating the diversity of the output, the diversity of the audience and its interests is at once apparent.

The actual size of the audience for adult education is often the subject of critical comment: it is true that compared with audiences of 20 million and more for popular entertainment programmes, the audiences for adult educational programmes are small. But a national audience of approximately 350,000 for each transmission of a programme within a serious educational series, broadcast at an hour which is not perhaps the ideal time for viewing, is still greater than the total number of adults attending all classes of adult education outside the home at any time.

To a large extent, the television audience will be made up of individuals who do not recognize that they have any personal educational need, but who 'happen' to be viewing, find their attention caught and their interest stimulated.

We must recognize that while the liberal arts may satisfy an intellectual minority of the population, the leisure interests of the majority are much more mundane. Creating a more comfortable domestic environment; having and bringing up a family; undertaking working and domestic duties more efficiently, thus gaining more satisfaction.

So it may reasonably be argued that the greatest contribution which television can make to adult education in the broadest sense is not in introducing the liberal arts to the many, but in helping ordinary people to gain satisfaction in their daily work and leisure and so become fuller individuals.

Was Horace writing of television in his Ode when he wrote: "Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor"—"I view the better things and approve; but I still prefer the rubbish"?

No matter what lip service is paid to the serious programmes, to the arts, to informative output, to the serious drama—entertainment is the main use which is made by viewers of television.

All the audience research indicates that although the most educated and socially highest classes of the community tend to watch *less* television than the remainder, the *pattern* of their viewing does not differ significantly, neither does the use to which they put the medium.

The fact that television has its audience not in hundreds in a single place, but in millions of family groups of three or four, is changing the style of presentation of entertainment. The great spectacular is being replaced with the one-man or two-man comedy, depending on situation rather than verbal humour. The red-nosed comedian is out. Communication in humour is becoming more personal, more immediate and direct.

But few facts are available to evaluate the effects or impact of television on the viewer—not only in terms of living-pattern, but of changed values, emotions and needs. There is no lack of speculation, of assertions, or of sheer guesswork. The question “What are the effects of television” should be rephrased to “What use is made of television by certain people, in certain circumstances, with certain needs”?

Each different personality will come to the television set with a different set of aspirations, values and needs, which inevitably affect the strength and direction of the stimulus offered by a particular programme. It is this impact of the programme upon the individual's needs which produces his personal response. It would require much more research for much longer before any ‘laws’ of audience reactions can be established.

Television reflects the purpose of the society of which it is part. If the purposes of the society are democratic, if the social good is conserved as the sum of happiness of free men and women, broadcasting is likely to assume and reflect these values. If the organi-

zation of the State is oligarchic or tyrannical then broadcasting, like all the other means of communication, will become the instrument of that dictatorship.

We might ask the same question of education itself. How much does what we know affect what we do? The educationists might argue that greater understanding will lead to rational behaviour; comprehension at least removes the excuse of ignorance and so increases responsibility. But that is not the complete answer. Information can be provided in great quantities and television certainly increases the *possibility* of learning because it communicates more to more people.

For the first time a generation of electors is being exposed, as a matter of policy, to the simultaneous presentation of all points of view. This is surely a virtue but perhaps the main force of television politics lies in the fact that the electors are brought into personal contact with representatives of political parties which they do not support.

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