
UNIT 28 TELEVISION

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

- to understand the concept of 'infotainment',
- to understand the potential of the medium of television as a liberal educator,
- to understand why television as a medium has such a powerful impact,
- to compare the potential and the reality of this medium, and so to reflect on what we see everyday, and
- to understand that television impacts what we judge to be acceptable in spoken English.

28.1 INTRODUCTION

We tend to think of education in terms of studying for a degree, being judged as superior or inferior to our fellow students, and the value of a degree on the job market. But there is a larger concept of education, which can be described as our awareness of the world around us. What are our beliefs about ourselves and the world? What is the level of our knowledge about the world and ourselves? These kinds of knowledge and beliefs shape our behaviour as individuals and as a society.

In real life not all of us have the means or the freedom to travel widely, or even to get away from the confines of our homes. Television can be thought of as a window on the world, which opens up the confines of our lives to a variety of ideas and opinions. But it has often been disparagingly called 'the idiot box,' suggesting that it has not always lived up to its potential.

In this unit we shall catch some glimpses of what television at its best can do, and think about the strengths of this medium. We shall begin with the vision for television that the pioneers in this medium had for it.

28.2 INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT = INFOTAINMENT

Most people think of television as a fun medium – for entertainment and relaxation. It is often disparagingly referred to as the “idiot box”. But television was not set up to be merely a fun medium. When BBC Television was first set up, for example, its charter was to educate and inform the public as well as to entertain it. After fifteen years of development of British television, its first Director-General, Sir Robert Fraser, had this to say:

“... in the world in general the media of entertainment and of information are quite separately and independently organized. On the one side are the theatres and cinemas and music ... and sports grounds ... On the other side are the newspapers and the periodicals and the lecture halls and even the universities and schools: all kinds of information, not just political information, current affairs and world affairs.

The most striking and absorbing change in television ... is that it has grown into a great medium of information; that it is now two things in one; that there has grown up within it this second medium ...: it is not only the largest medium of popular entertainment, it is also the largest medium of popular information. It is theatre and newspaper in one.”

It is theatre and newspaper in one. And, we might add, it is also an educator! Not merely in the sense that there is a Countrywide Classroom sponsored by the University Grants Commission in India, or that there are Educational Television programmes all over the world, starting with the American programme Sesame Street for pre-primary children. Rather, television has been called “a liberal educator”. This is because, through its general output, it becomes an agency of awareness and thus an educational influence.

28.2.3 Television the Liberal Educator

The media commentator Brian Groombridge tells us:

“Education may imply merely the transmission of a body of knowledge or socially useful skills; liberal education lays emphasis on the fullest possible development of the individual, stressing the importance of imaginative experience as against the cognitive, and of the realm of values ...”

He adds:

“Television’s power as an educator is best demonstrated by one crucial comparison: between what most children know now before they go to primary school and what they knew at the same age before there was television.”

Television allows us to become citizens of the world while sitting in our home in a village or town, and to become conscious of the universe while we stay rooted on earth. Every child in fact aspires to be at the centre of a widening circle of identities, beginning with his or her name and actual physical location, but ending with finding a place in the universe. Brian Groombridge draws our attention to what he calls the ‘cosmological address game’, which all children at school seem to have played at some point. (This game is actually recorded in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, whose hero Stephen Dedalus writes his address in the fly leaf of his geography book in this manner.) Children may write their names in their school books in the following manner:

The cosmological address game

Sudha Kumar
Class IV
The Modern High School
Jabalpur
Madhya Pradesh
India
Asia
The World
The Earth
The Solar System
The Universe ...

This is a game, says Groombridge, which “enabled a child to express and enjoy his mastery of information acquired gradually, perhaps with difficulty, and his wonder of being an inhabitant of such an unimaginably vast geographic complex. Children today absorb this information and perspective almost without noticing it. The address game helps them marshal their awareness”.

Activity

Talk to a few young parents, and to grandparents. Make a note of whether they say things like “Children today are much better informed than we were”, “Children today know a lot”, “They make up their own minds, they don’t listen to us”.

Are they happy or unhappy about this? Do they say these things in pride and with admiration, or in disapproval?

What reasons do they give for what they say? What reasons do they give for children’s being better informed in our day and age?

✓ **Check Your Progress 1**

1. Write a paragraph (or about 100-200 words) on your findings from the activity described above. You may use the following outline for your writing:

Begin: ‘I spoke to the parents of _____ (names/ages of children) (and/or) the grandparents of _____ (names/ages of children) about how well-informed, in their opinion, the children were (in comparison with what they themselves had been like as children, or other children of their own generation. ...)’

Continue by mentioning a few opinions from the parents/ grandparents: ‘Many of them felt that/ agreed that/... But some of them felt that ... expressed the view that’

Conclude by mentioning the sources of the children’s knowledge, as reported by the parents/ grandparents. You may also mention any favourite television programmes the children are reported to have, or any quizzes they take part in, or if television or the internet helps them with their homework, and so on.

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Conclude.....

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- 2. Have you ever played 'The cosmological address game'? Ask a few children and adults of your acquaintance if they played such a game at school. Write down your own address below in the form of this game, as shown in the box above.

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Think about it

Television has destroyed most of those monopolies in experience which are based on location (one of the few happening to be in the right place) or on privilege or both.

Brian Groombridge

A few days after the successful moon-landing of Apollo II, a commentator wrote: There were no privileged guests or spectators at this unique moment in man's existence. It was shared at exactly the same moment by monarchs, dictators, heads of state and tycoons – no matter how rich or powerful – with the humble mechanic in Tokyo and the poorest Mexican grape-picker in California.

28.2.4 The Electronic Babysitter

How much TV do children watch, and what kind?

Television has been called an “electronic babysitter”. In the 1980s, according to one estimate, children spent an average of 27 hours a week watching TV. It was also estimated that an American student graduating from high school would have spent more hours watching TV than in the classroom! TV has the potential to be both an electronic school and a library for children.

Apart from mainstream commercial television, therefore, there have been recurrent attempts to make programmes for children that had an educational, informative and entertainment function all at once. The most well-known effort was *Sesame Street*. It used songs, skits, puppets and animation to introduce children to the basics of counting, reading, and becoming aware of the world around them. It has been broadcast in 90 countries, and Indian counterparts of this programme have also been attempted.

Some television programmes are designed to promote reading among slightly older children. A programme called *Reading Rainbow* used animation, music, dramatization and a magazine-style format to introduce children between the ages of six and nine to the magic of reading. Books were dramatized and reviewed, and research showed a twenty per cent increase in the number of books borrowed by children from libraries, as a result of the programme.

For adults, such programmes as *The Ascent of Man* by Jacob Bronowski, and *Cosmos* by the astronomer Carl Sagan, were originally produced for television and then developed into ‘telecourses’ for use in colleges and universities. This was done by ‘wrapping’ print material around the televised material, to enhance its educational value. The ancillary print materials might include a printed text of the programme supported by visuals from the teleseries; study guides; an anthology of readings; and a manual for the faculty, administrator or student suggesting how to use the material. Thus we have here another example of ‘media mix’, a support by print to television in the interests of education.

✓ Check Your Progress 2

3. Name two popular science television series that were developed into ‘telecourses’ for use in colleges and universities.

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4. Can television help to popularize reading?

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5. Why is television called the 'electronic babysitter'?

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28.3 THE IMPACT OF MOVING PICTURES AND SPOKEN WORDS

Read these excerpts from Jacob Bronowski's Preface to his book *The Ascent of Man*, based on his series of television programmes for the BBC. It puts into simple words many of the typical characteristics of the medium described in media textbooks.

Paragraph 1 (Excerpt 1)

"The invitation to me from the British Broadcasting Corporation was to present the development of science in a series of television programmes ... Television is an admirable medium for exposition in several ways: powerful and immediate to the eye, able to take the spectator bodily into the places and processes that are described, and conversational enough to make him conscious that what he witnesses are not events but the actions of people."

Paragraph 2 (Excerpt 2)

"...we come to the common ground between television and the printed book. Unlike a lecture or a cinema show, television is not directed to crowds. It is addressed to two or three people in a room, as a conversation face-to-face – a one-sided conversation for the most part, as the book is, but homely and Socratic nevertheless."

Paragraph 3 (Excerpt 3)

"The printed book has one added freedom beyond this: it is not remorselessly bound to the forward direction of time, as any spoken discourse is. The reader can do what the viewer and the listener cannot, which is to pause and reflect, turn the pages back and the argument over, compare one fact with another and, in general, appreciate the detail of evidence without being distracted by it. I have taken advantage of this more leisurely march of mind whenever I could, in putting on paper now what was first said on the television screen. What was said had required a great volume of research, ... and it would have been sad not to capture some of that richness in this book. ..."

Paragraph 4 (Excerpt 4)

"In rendering the text used on the screen, I have followed the spoken word closely, for two reasons. First, I wanted to preserve the spontaneity of thought in speech ... Second and more important, I wanted equally to guard the spontaneity of the argument. A spoken argument is informal and heuristic; it singles out the heart of the matter and shows in what way it is crucial and new; and it gives the direction and line of the solution so that, simplified as it is, still the logic is right."

Jacob Bronowski, Preface,
The Ascent of Man, 1973
London: British Broadcasting Corporation

✓ **Check Your Progress 3**

6. Below we give a series of statements about the media. Try to match each of these statements to Jacob Bronowski's words. Look in the paragraph indicated. The first one has been done for you as an example.

Paragraph 1 (Excerpt 1)

- i. Television is a medium that conveys experience. It takes the viewer by the hand and leads him into new places and experiences.

“Television is ... able to take the spectator bodily into the places and processes that are described”.

Paragraph 1 (Excerpt 1)

- ii. Television is an intimate medium.

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- iii. For most of us, 'seeing is believing', so the experience of television has an immediate and lasting impact.

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Paragraph 2 (Excerpt 2)

- iv. Television is a **distributed** medium like a printed book, even though it is a mass medium.

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- v. It is a **unidirectional** medium – it allows only one-way communication.

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Paragraph 3 (Excerpt 3)

- vi. Television is primarily a temporal medium; print is a spatial medium.

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Paragraph 4 (Excerpt 4)

vii. Television uses spoken language rather than written language.

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Here is what Carl Sagan, the astronomer, had to say about the relationship of the book *Cosmos* and the television series of the same name, *Cosmos*. Again, you will find in his words some echoes of ideas that have been introduced to you in this Block. You now know about how media complement and supplement each other, and how different media have their own strengths. Recall, for example, that TV is a temporal medium, but videotape technology brings to it the strength of the book, of permanence.

“The book and the television series evolved together. In some sense each is based on the other. Many illustrations in this book are based on the striking visuals prepared for the television series. But books and television series have somewhat different audiences and admit differing approaches. One of the great virtues of a book is that it is possible for the reader to return repeatedly to obscure or difficult passages; this is only beginning to become possible, with the development of videotape and video-disc technology, for television. There is much more freedom for the author in choosing the range and depth of topics for a chapter in a book than for the procrustean fifty eight minutes, thirty seconds of a noncommercial television programme.”

Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, 1980.
New York: Ballantine Books, Random House.

(Remember that Sagan was writing in the year 1980. That is why he refers to ‘the development of videotape and video-disc technology’ as a recent occurrence!)

28.4 THE POTENTIAL OF TELEVISION: AND A REALITY CHECK

Cosmos was a thirteen-part television series “oriented towards astronomy but with a very broad human perspective”. It had an estimated worldwide viewing audience of over 200 million people, or almost 5% of the human population of that time (the 1980s), in 60 countries. A citation by the Ohio State University’s Annual Award for Television Excellence called it “perhaps the most original and unique contribution to television programming made during the past three years ... It entertains, instructs, informs, excites and inspires ...” An editorial in the *Washington Post* said that “*Cosmos* is fulfilling the promise proponents of television have always said was there: that the techniques of the medium could be used to enrich viewers without boring them and to give them more than just fun and games. ...”

Now read these words of Carl Sagan, the astronomer, from his introduction to *Cosmos*, about how the series was conceived.

“In the summer and fall of 1976, ... I was engaged, with a hundred of my scientific colleagues, in the exploration of the planet Mars. For the first time in human history we had landed two vehicles on the surface of another world. ... And yet the general public was learning almost nothing of these great happenings. The press was largely inattentive; television ignored the mission almost altogether. ... I was

positive from my own experience that an enormous global interest exists in the exploration of the planets and in many kindred scientific topics ... And I was certain that this interest could be excited through that most powerful communications medium, television.”

What this suggests is that the potential of television is not always realized, because of inadequacies in how programmes are conceived. In the case of *Cosmos*, the scientists felt strongly enough that they had to share their discoveries and scientific vision, to form a production company and a team with support from the Public Broadcasting Service in the U.S.A. For the rest of us, such grandeur of vision and execution may not be possible. Nevertheless, by reflecting on what we see on television and making informed choices, we can guide the content of television towards more informative, humanistic and stimulating programming, away from mindless vulgarity or titillation.

Given below are some statements by Brian Groombridge about the potential of television as an educator. Discuss with your fellow-learners whether you agree with these statements, after doing the activities suggested below each statement.

“Television liberally educates because ... through television we are faced by alternative life-styles, cultures and mores*, based on differences of class, race, generation and subculture.”

[*mores (pronounced ‘more-ay-z’): a formal word for the customs or conventions typical of a group or community]

Activity

Make a list of

- (i) the television programmes you normally watch
- (ii) the television programmes available to you

Do you think that these programmes give you insight into people who live in a way different from your own? Do you see people of different races, classes and generations represented in them?

If your answer is ‘yes’, support it with examples.

If your answer is ‘no’, can you think of any programmes to watch where you would be exposed to these different kinds of people?

Use the pages at the end of this unit to record your observations.

“Television liberally educates because it provides a rich diet of imaginative experience, most successfully and consistently through drama. Cinema and radio began to democratize experience of drama; television has provided universal access to it. ... Television has raised the standards of drama as a whole ...”

Activity

Keep a record over a week of the television drama you and your family watch. Do you agree that “television has raised the standards of drama as a whole”?

Make a list of the plays you consider to be good drama. Discuss whether these plays have been televised.

How does television compare with film in terms of quality, in your opinion?

Use the pages at the end of this unit to record your observations.

28.5 THE AURAL-ORAL ASPECTS OF A VISUAL MEDIUM

We think of television primarily as a visual medium, although it is strictly a visual-aural medium. It is true that if there is no picture, there is no television! But to see how important sound is for this medium, try turning down the volume to zero for just one minute as you watch TV. (Time yourself – do not cheat.) You will be surprised at the result!

Sound on television consists of the spoken word, music, natural sound produced on location, and sound effects. These sounds contribute to the illusion of reality created by television. Without them, the medium does not come alive.

Since this course is about communication in English, we quote below two paragraphs from Groombridge again, this time about the importance of the spoken word in television, and about the impact of the medium on the spoken word.

“Before television showed it the way, the spoken word on radio was scripted; it was prose of a special kind written to be read aloud. Television has established the public use of oral speech. In drawing its material – actual and imaginative – from a variety of cultures, television has done something of immense social and educational significance: it has asserted the validity and acceptability of a wide range of accents, dialects and idioms. It has almost entirely subverted the idea that authority, authoritativeness, ‘correctness’ go with standard English or received pronunciation.”

Activity

Watch television for an evening or two. Make a list of the programmes (in any language) which are

- (i) scripted
- (ii) unscripted.

Do you see a difference in the language? Which kind of programme do you find more natural, or easier to understand?

Now narrow your list down to only the English language programmes (for example, news, current affairs, the UGC’s Countrywide Classroom, and cricket commentary, for a start). Try to make a list of the different kinds of English you hear: scripted and unscripted, formal and informal. Who are the speakers? What are their nationalities or sub-nationalities, what are their professions? (Make a guess about these where you do not know.) What kinds of English do you find easy, or difficult, to understand?

Use the pages at the end of this unit to record your observations.

“Television’s use and acceptance of varieties of English as they are spoken is of enormous educational importance. Insistence on ‘correct’ speech has been one of the most insidious ways in which the education system has hitherto accomplished its repressive task of social segregation. It has been a chief function of schools to cream-off an elite to run the country and its institutions ... Television has countered that by treating the way people actually speak with respect.”

28.6 LET US SUM UP

- 1 Television was not set up to be merely a fun medium. BBC Television’s its charter was to educate and inform the public as well as to entertain it.

- 2 TV is not only the largest medium of popular entertainment, it is also the largest medium of popular information.
- 3 Television has been called “a liberal educator”, because it is an agency of awareness and thus an educational influence.
- 4 Television allows us to become citizens of the world while sitting in our home in a village or town, and to become conscious of the universe while we stay rooted on earth.
- 5 Television has been called an “electronic babysitter”. In the 1980s, according to one estimate, children spent an average of 27 hours a week watching TV. American students graduating from high school would have spent more hours watching TV than in the classroom! TV has the potential to be both an electronic school and library for children.
- 6 Television is a medium that conveys experience. It takes the viewer by the hand and leads him into new places and experiences.
- 7 Television is an intimate medium.
- 8 For most of us, ‘seeing is believing’, so the experience of television has an immediate and lasting impact.
- 9 Television is a **distributed** medium like a printed book, even though it is a mass medium.
- 10 It is a **unidirectional** medium – it allows only one-way communication.
- 11 Television is primarily a temporal medium; print is a spatial medium.
- 12 Television uses spoken language rather than written language.
- 13 The potential of television is not always realized, because of inadequacies in how programmes are conceived. By reflecting on what we see on television and making informed choices, we can guide the content of television towards more informative, humanistic and stimulating programming, away from mindless vulgarity or titillation.
- 14 Television liberally educates because through television we are faced by alternative life-styles and cultures. Television provides a rich diet of imaginative experience.
- 15 We think of television primarily as a visual medium, although it is strictly a visual-aural medium.
- 16 Sound on television consists of the spoken word, music, natural sound produced on location, and sound effects. These sounds contribute to the illusion of reality created by television.
- 17 Before television showed it the way, the spoken word on radio was scripted. Television has established the public use of oral speech.
- 18 It has asserted the validity and acceptability of a wide range of accents, dialects and idioms. Television’s use and acceptance of varieties of English as they are spoken is of enormous educational importance.

28.7 FURTHER READING

Brian Groombridge, *Television and the People*.

Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man*, 1973. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, 1980. New York: Ballantine Books, Random House.

The Open University, Britain. *Imaging and Visual Thinking*. (Unit 5, Art and Environment.)

28.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Please write a paragraph using the hints suggested, based on your own experience.
2. Please answer these questions from your own experience, and share your answers with your group of fellow-students.

Check Your Progress 2

3. *The Ascent of Man* by Jacob Bronowski, and *Cosmos* by the astronomer Carl Sagan.
4. Television programmes can be designed to promote reading, by using animation, music, and dramatization of books, to introduce children between the ages of six and nine to the magic of reading. Books can be reviewed. Research for a programme called Reading Rainbow showed a twenty per cent increase in the number of books borrowed by children from libraries, as a result of the programme.
5. Children have been found to watch about 27 hours of TV a week in America, according to one estimate. More time is spent watching TV than at school. Since children like to watch television, it serves the purpose of a babysitter who looks after them and keeps them out of mischief.

Check Your Progress 3

6. i. Television is a medium that conveys experience. Television takes the viewer by the hand and leads him into new places and experiences.

“Television is ... able to take the spectator bodily into the places and processes that are described”.

- ii. Television is an intimate medium.

“Television is ... conversational enough to make him conscious that what he witnesses are not events but the actions of people”.

- iii. For most of us, ‘seeing is believing’s, so the experience of television has an immediate and lasting impact.

“Television is ... powerful and immediate to the eye.”

- iv. Television is a **distributed** medium, even though it is a mass medium.

“Unlike a lecture or a cinema show, television is not directed to crowds. It is addressed to two or three people in a room, as a conversation face-to-face ...”

- v. It is a unidirectional medium – it allows only one-way communication.

“...we come to the common ground between television and the printed book. ... It is ... a conversation face-to-face – a one-sided conversation for the most part, as the book is ...”

- vi. Television is primarily a temporal medium; print is a spatial medium.

“The printed book has one added freedom beyond this: it is not remorselessly bound to the forward direction of time, as any spoken discourse is. The reader can do what the viewer and the listener cannot, which is to pause and reflect, turn the pages back and the argument over, compare one fact with another and, in general, appreciate the detail of evidence without being distracted by it”.

- vii. Television uses spoken language rather than written language.

‘ ... I have followed the spoken word closely ...’