

Links between television and behaviour: Students' perceptions of TV's impact in St Helena, South Atlantic

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TV is often blamed for violent and other antisocial behaviour, although the evidence is sketchy. Unlike many studies, the St Helena project is not showing adverse effects of TV viewing; moreover, there are signs of improved behaviour. This article considers students' perceptions of TV's impact in one of the world's most isolated communities. In the light of their recent findings, Tony Charlton and Susan O'Beay suggest it is society's failings which have fostered antisocial behaviour elsewhere in the world, not TV.

The allure of the television

Television first mesmerised us some fifty years ago, since which time it has intruded vigorously into all but the exceptional home. The impact of its psychological and physical allure is without precedent (do all your lounge chairs point towards the TV?). Consequently, it has now become 'an integral part of daily life ... to a degree not matched by any cultural institution since preindustrial religion' (Shanahan and Morgan 1992, p. 36). Furthermore, it monopolises more of our leisure time than any other single activity (apart from sleeping). For example, in the USA, the average set is switched on for up to seven hours daily (Sprafkin, Gadow and Abelman 1992). 'Time switched on' may not correspond directly to 'time viewed' but, even so, the volume of time given to TV viewing is weighty. In the USA, for instance, Anderson and Collins (1988) reported average weekly viewing hours of 27.8 hours for 2- to 5-year-olds, 24.3 hours for 6- to 11-year-olds and 23 hours for teenagers, whilst in the UK the Broadcasters' Audience Research Council (BARB 1995) found that most 8- to 15-year-olds viewed for around 3.2 hours daily. Likewise, some notion of TV's widespread appeal is provided by Comstock's (1984) reference to a

made-for-TV film, *The Day After*, attracting a 'live' audience of 100 million in the USA.

Content effects of viewing

Despite its universal appeal, TV has been blamed repeatedly for many of society's ills. Muggings, violence, murders and rape are among a plenitude of antisocial behaviours attributed to TV, the allegation being that the viewing of violence and other antisocial acts encourages imitations of it. Concerns such as these are heightened by estimations that real-life mayhem in newsreels and violent portrayals in films and soaps, for example, mean that: 'The average American child will see 32,000 murders, 40,000 attempted murders and 250,000 total acts of violence on television before reaching the age of 18 years' (McGilvary 1991, p. 3).

However, the evidence underpinning these allegations is sketchy, and ample evidence can be mustered to argue against, as well as in support of, these charges. Whether the evidence assembled is supportive or antagonistic depends in no small way upon the type of methodology the research evidence is drawn from. Findings from highly controlled laboratory settings usually make strong claims that viewing violence encourages viewers to practise such behaviour (for example, Bandura 1986). In contrast, naturalistic research, whilst providing a measure of support for this link (Joy, Kimball and Zabrak 1986), is often less enthusiastic about it.

Nevertheless, these conceptual links have been challenged on a number of accounts. First, studies conducted in the controlled and artificial setting of the laboratory generalise weakly to real-life settings. Secondly, although the naturalistic study produces gains through 'the realism and the validity of the study for assessing effects in real life' (Joy, Kimball

and Zabrack 1986, p. 307), too few opportunities arise for pre-TV data collections to allow for convincing claims for TV effects. It is difficult, anyway, to make causal inferences in naturalistic inquiry (for example, because of a lack of experimental controls).

Thirdly, and with some justification, there are those who protest that a preoccupation with 'bad' effects obscures findings of beneficial outcomes from TV (see Gunter in press). For example, Zielinska and Chambers' (1995) study showed pre-schoolers who viewed pro-social behaviours behaved significantly more pro-socially than their peers who were exposed to neutral viewing. Similar outcomes have been demonstrated for young children's TV shows such as *Sesame Street* and *The Waltons*, and Gunter (1984) reminds us that 'some programmes, for example, deliberately emphasise pro-social themes of generosity, helpfulness and co-operation between people, and even those action-dramas in which violence is most commonly and vividly portrayed often feature positive, socially desirable behaviour' (p. 152).

Given this more agreeable face of TV, it is unremarkable that evidence has been found that viewing pro-social behaviour on TV encourages children to become more socially responsible, more helpful and friendlier (see Charlton 1996b).

Finally, arguments are made that the contradictions and inconsistencies in media effects research show that claims for this linkage are spurious, because if 'after sixty years of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified, then we should conclude that they are simply not there to be found' (Gauntlett in press).

Displacement effects of viewing

Given individuals' considerable preoccupations with the 'one-eyed monster' (Gunter and McAleer 1990), it is hardly surprising that TV is accused of changing viewers into couch potatoes and social isolates, allegations which are not without some foundation. When TV is introduced into a community, the time for viewing is displaced from other more traditional leisure time activities. For instance, when TV arrived in a small town in Western Canada, its greatest negative impact was on sports, followed by attendances at dances, suppers and parties (Williams and Handford 1986). Moreover, this effect was stronger for youths than adults. Other activities threatened in this way include interactions between children and their parent(s) as well as other care-givers. Any reduction in this form of contact is regrettable, given that:

Children learn from their social interactions (and TV is seldom interactive); these experiences can enhance their social skills, foster their language development, and facilitate the acquisition of attitudes and beliefs as well as concepts of what is right and wrong. Reductions in

the amount of time given to talking and playing with young children endangers opportunities for children's healthy social development and functioning. (Charlton in press)

The American Psychological Society's finding that children tend to spend fewer than four minutes daily talking *with* their parents only adds to these concerns.

Elusive links

So, what is the verdict on links between TV viewing and viewers' behaviour? Well, there is unanimity on TV's displacement effects. As TV becomes available it abducts time from other activities to dedicate to viewing; among pastimes most at risk are those which are functionally similar (such as the cinema, video and radio). By comparison, opinion on TV's content effects is characterised by a conflict and polarisation which insinuate that confounding differences exist among the various methodologies used to investigate these links. With shortcomings of this kind in mind, Gauntlett (in press) faults what he sees as misguided approaches to media effects research. He outlines ten flaws with the 'effects model', one of which is to do with claims that the subject of social problems (such as violence) is tackled backwards, 'by starting with the media and then trying to lasso connections from there on to social beings, rather than the other way round' (Gauntlett in press).

To highlight legitimate ways to undertake this research, Gauntlett refers to Hagell and Newburn's (1994) study which listened to young offenders' perspectives of their viewing habits and then traced their behaviour backwards whilst looking at their media usage.

Regrettably, this type of listening facility is often discounted in media effects research, even though it offers access to important standpoints. Elsewhere, however, the notion of listening to youngsters has been championed from a human rights perspective. Consequently, young people's voices are now being attended to with more frequency in social services, the judiciary and education (Davie and Galloway 1996). Charlton (1996a) outlines gains which can accrue from this listening facility, one of which is that adults gain insight into youngsters' perceptions of the experiences they encounter, and their influence upon their behaviour. Hopefully, before too long, this type of attention will filter more convincingly into media effects research.

Children's perceptions of TV's influence

An extensive literature search has failed to uncover a single study which attended to youngsters' *perceptions* of TV's impact upon their lives. Even allowing for limited opportunities to collect such views across the availability of TV, this omission is regrettable, for youngsters are likely to hold important insights into TV's influence upon themselves and others around them.

Along these lines, Lewis (1992) maintains that group interviews are a viable and useful technique which can provide positive opportunities for attending to the views of children and, in doing so, cueing in to a perspective which might otherwise be ignored. Although talking about education, her views are just as pertinent to media research.

This article now focuses on a substudy from an on-going ESRC-funded research project in St Helena, South Atlantic. The project is monitoring the introduction of TV upon young children's social behaviour. In the pre-TV stage, young children in classrooms and playgrounds were found by Charlton, Abrahams and Jones (1995) to be among the best behaved world-wide and to spend longer periods of time on-task in classrooms than their overseas peers (Charlton, Lovmore, Essex and Crowie 1995). Additionally, some 18 months after the availability of TV, observations of children's playground behaviour and teachers' ratings of their pupils' behaviour showed that low levels of antisocial behaviour had been maintained. More surprisingly – though the reasons for this are unclear, as yet – significant decreases were noted in the frequencies with which young children engage in antisocial behaviours such as teasing and fighting (Charlton 1997).

This article refers to a group discussion on TV effects undertaken by year 12 and 13 students on St Helena. This discussion was essentially a pilot study aiming to identify areas of students' perceptions of TV which were meaningful and ripe for further explorations in later group discussions

Background to the study

St Helena, a British colony in the South Atlantic Ocean with a population of around 6000, is among the world's most isolated inhabited islands. Commercial access to the Island is restricted to the infrequent visits by the RMS *St Helena*. The island is without daily newspapers, a cinema, a regular bus service, an airport and, until recently, broadcast TV. Satellite television (CNN) was beamed to St Helena for the first time in March 1995. Since then, the TV network has expanded to incorporate two channels, offering a mix of CNN, Hallmark (films), Discovery Channel, SuperSport and Cartoon Network. Viewing is possible 'around the clock'.

The St Helena project is now in its sixth year. Prior to the arrival of TV, extensive data were collected on children's leisure-time pursuits, and on their behaviour in classrooms and in the playground. Teachers were also asked to comment on the extent of problem behaviours in classrooms and elsewhere in the school. After the availability of TV, data were collected in the same pre-TV areas. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative data were collected on children's TV viewing habits (their programme and character preferences as well as their viewing hours) and levels of parental mediation of children's viewing. Young children and older students were also provided with opportunities

to produce independently (without adult interference) video- and tape-recordings of their perceptions of TV's impact on their community.

The study

Subjects were year 12 and 13 students ($N = 9$) attending an A-level history class at the Prince Andrew School, St Helena. The headteacher invited the students to discuss their perceptions of TV's effects on St Helena. With the group's agreement, they were left unsupervised in their classroom to undertake the discussion with an open agenda; the proceedings were tape-recorded. With the guidance of a group (student) leader, discussion included both content effects ('Does the TV's programme content affect the viewer?') and displacement effects of broadcast TV ('Where does time come from to give to viewing?'). Timetable restrictions limited the discussion to just less than one hour.

This article makes reference to selected parts of the tape-recorded discussion. It then considers conditions which might account for the continuing good behaviour among young children some 18 months after the availability of TV.

Who is affected by TV?

Students were not short of thoughts about who was being affected by TV, or how it was affecting them. There was a consensus that it was not the younger ones, but the adults, who were being influenced most. One student commented, 'Look at the old people now. You never see them.' Another added, 'They don't talk. They're not cooking properly,' whilst someone else exclaimed, 'I think the old people, they never had TV, and now they're getting excited [laughter]; but they're getting excited in their own homes, watching TV.'

At other times, the debate was concerned more about content effects upon adults (such as imitation) than displacement effects. During the preceding few months, there had been two major demonstrations on the island, one by the teachers and the other by a group more representative of the general population. One protest march was to do with teachers' pay, the other was to do with cuts in UK grant-in-aid to the island. To the students, these protests appeared startling, and represented a form of organised group behaviour rarely (if ever) shown on the island. Students were in no doubt about where the adults' behaviour had been learned:

We've had two protest marches in the last two years.

Two years! Two months, you mean.

They got the Governor by the necktie. Big riots and everything. And then you got the teachers marching, But that was a good cause, though. Now where did they learn that?

By watching the news. You always see them doing that sort of thing. It works ... then you copy it. Like the teachers and the Longwood people.

There were no marches and protests before TV. That's the older generation being influenced by TV.

However, the 'older' folk had learned something from TV and there was general agreement that 'TV is helping us stand up for ourselves ... We see others doing it, and we learn that way.'

Another student was herself affected by TV, although in a different way to many of her peers. She confessed that: 'TV drives me out of the house. I won't stay because they [the family?] want to watch CNN or one of those stupid sports. I don't want to stay in the house and watch that. It's not just the noise; it's a waste of time.' As an alternative to TV viewing, she did things outside, and went into town ... 'to meet friends and do things'. Another even admitted that 'reading was now out of the question; they draw the curtains and the noise ...!'

Asked if they would miss TV if the transmissions ceased, there were mixed feelings, as the following remarks show:

- 'I would in some ways.'
- 'But in some ways it would be good to get back to normal.'
- 'I would be glad. I'd start seeing my friends again.'
- 'I would find it difficult to adjust. I kind of look forward to things [programmes?] now.'
- 'My school work would suffer. I get a lot of info from the TV.'

Displacement effects: What gives way for TV viewing

If time is given to viewing, then it has to be taken from elsewhere. The availability of TV (when people watch it) changes the ways in which individuals, young and old, allocate their leisure time. So how did the students perceive TV's displacement effects in St Helena?

One, for example, admitted that she 'used to get up on a Sunday and do things' but now admits, 'I get up and switch on the TV.' Others confessed that TV was affecting their school work and explained that 'If Newcastle play somebody we don't get the homework done.' However, others were quick to point out that certain TV programmes were of great help to their schoolwork and supplemented the work undertaken in school by showing 'different countries and how different people behave and live'.

Whilst video viewing had been popular on the island for some years before TV arrived, video-viewing habits were now changing: 'Lots of people watch TV now instead of borrowing video tapes, because it's cheaper to do that.' The extent of this shift was illustrated by one student who 'used to buy [hire] 10 videotapes at the weekend. But now I don't buy any. I watch TV,' although she did admit, 'half the time I don't know what I'm watching. I guess I'm just too lazy to turn the TV off.'

Elsewhere in the group discussion, students highlighted how listening to the radio (Radio St Helena and BBC World Service) was becoming less popular. The discussion followed these lines:

Do you listen to the radio, Radio St Helena?

Not as much as I use to. It's not interesting anymore. We get the same things all the time. About government, about the court and police matters and such things. It gets really boring now.

Numbers are declining for the radio... Why listen to it?

On TV it's world-wide. On radio it's more local. Not that interesting.

You know all the people [on the radio], and you know what they're going to say. It's much better watching video stars and that on CNN.

So the 'parochial' appeared to be on the wane, to be superseded by famous faces and voices from the pop music and film worlds. The attractions (and repetitions) of frequent TV world news broadcasts were clearly rated higher by the students than radio broadcasts outlining local affairs. More to the point, according to one student, 'TV took you to real places', and court drama such as the O. J. Simpson trial enabled 'your eyes as well as your ears' to tune in. Even so, it was pointed out that listening to the radio enabled the listener to engage simultaneously in other pastimes (sewing, model building, mending the car and even reading). TV could abduct your whole mind, and your eyes as well as your ears.

More immediate indicators of TV's influence were apparent at the Consulate Hotel in Main Street. This was one of the popular places where people once would congregate for a drink in the lounge or in the covered outside bar. But, as one student described, now:

It's deserted. People don't come out like they use to. They stop at home ... they eat their meals on their knee and they don't move now. I went to get some chips [at the Consulate Snackbar] and there was no one there except ... [for one person]. There was no one there. They were all watching TV. Even Danny, behind the bar, was watching TV.

Another commented that it was mainly 'the older ones who do that. The mid-agers. The young ones still go to discos and things like that.' But then a colleague argued that 'At the weekend people used to come out, the young ones as well, but a lot of them prefer to stay in their homes now, and watch TV.'

Further discussion, however, established that it was not just the 'mid-agers' who were 'glued to the box'. Many youngsters and younger adults watched too, and were influenced by their viewing, particularly on the sports

channel (SuperSport): 'It changes them [the viewers]. They watch a football game one night, say Newcastle, and then at the weekend they're all professionals; they're falling down and screaming at the ref and diving on the ground. There are no amateurs on St Helena now.'

Violence on TV

Most of the group admitted they viewed 'some' violence during most evening. For example:

When we come home in the afternoon, we watch a bit of violence ... Some of the films on Hallmark are packed with horror and violence. Blood and brains ... ugh. And SuperSport.

You get lots of violence there.

You watch the wrestling. That's violence for you. And the crowd are screaming them on, telling them to 'Kill them'. And in the cartoons there's always someone bashing someone; that's violence for you. That's murder.

This last comment was responded to by at least two peers, one of whom commented, 'yeah, but that's cartoons, isn't it. Not real. Not like you get on CNN.'

Others appeared less concerned about violence in films and cartoons and more worried about the news where the 'worst things to see were wars and riots, and children being crippled by mines and guns'. They confessed to not being keen followers of the news, yet as one student exclaimed, 'But, if anything drastic happens ..., then I'm there. Up the front. There was that spacecraft trying to reach the earth. I just sat there, watching. And my brothers and daddy.'

Even so, students were sensitive to more general fears that TV 'could make you violent.' But, not on St Helena, in their opinion. The students felt that this may be the case elsewhere in the world, but, 'I don't think we get more violent or such things ... Maybe in Britain and America, but not here.' Why was St Helena presumed to be a safe haven from such ill-effects? The students' remarks revealed it was difficult to indulge in antisocial acts on the island, 'Because everyone watches you,' and 'because everyone knows you [*sigh*];' 'You've just got to behave, if you don't ... someone will see you.'

The isolation and the remoteness of the island, together with a relatively small population, most of whom were known to each other, had combined to create a fairly close and watchful community. This 'watchfulness' appears to facilitate a type and degree of pastoral care whereby it becomes difficult for anyone's need and behaviour to go unheeded. Furthermore, this watchfulness appeared to effect a high degree of accountability (in terms of behaviour) among the community.

What kinds of programmes did the students like best?

What did the students like best on TV? There was no unanimity on this point. Some said:

It's got to be SuperSport. You've got Pro Golf, you've got football, and wrestling and basketball and things.

What about Cartoon Network; it's not that bad. I watch it every afternoon after school. *Jonny Quest*, *The Mask* and *Dexter's Lab*.

It's not that good either.

Switch it off!

What about Discovery Channel. I get up sometimes at 3 in the morning to watch it. It's brilliant. Some of the things you see are amazing. You get *Wildlife* and *The New Explorers* and that type of thing.

But SuperSport gives you the football. That's what everybody likes. They're sport mad.

But then the CNN News gives you information on what's happening. You can see it, as well. And it keeps you up to date with world sport.

Another expressed the view that 'Adverts are better than some of the programmes. My sister's baby knows all the tunes. She's addicted.'

Others valued having up-to-date visual contact with the outside world, even though CNN included many repeats. Students' knowledge of current affairs was increasing; they were learning more about other countries about droughts, 'about heatwaves, wars, about threats of pollution upon the world'. On occasion, history was brought alive too: 'I like the Discovery Channel. They [the programmes] go into history. I know they had one on Hitler. As I'm a Hitler fan, it was good [*laughter*].'

Students' perceptions and early findings from the research substudies

The extracts from the students' discussion matched well with other findings about TV's effects upon the island. Leisure time habits are changing to accommodate a 'new' technology which is enticing people away from their more traditional activities and into the living room and in front of the TV. Elsewhere in the study, there has been no reliable indicator that social behaviour of young children has deteriorated; indeed, there are firm indications that some aspects of behaviour have improved. So, the students' reflections were more or less consistent with children's reports of their use of leisure time, teachers' ratings of their pupils' behaviour and independent observations of children's behaviour in classrooms and playgrounds.

Conclusion

Nearly two years after the availability of TV in St Helena, low rates of antisocial behaviour among young children have been maintained (Charlton 1997, Charlton, in prep.). Put more directly, there is no indication that their social behaviour has deteriorated during that period. Moreover, there is evidence that aspects of the children's behaviour have improved. For example, they are now less likely to tease their peers and to fight with them. These results were conspicuous within video recordings of young children's free-play behaviour in playgrounds, in teachers' ratings of pupils' social behaviour as well as in older students' discussions about TV's effects. Such findings are remarkable given the outcomes from other naturalistic inquiries which have shown the arrival of TV has been followed by significant increases in antisocial behaviour (Joy, Kimball and Zabrak 1986, Centerwall 1989).

At this juncture, though, it is not feasible to conclude that TV has not generated unfavourable effects upon children's behaviour, just as it is not possible to presume that TV was responsible for the improvements noted in behaviour. Other behaviour-altering experiences may have intervened between the Phase 1 and Phase 2 measurements (pre-/post-TV measurement occasions), although a search for such occurrences has not yet been fruitful. Nevertheless, what is evident is that nearly two years after the inception of broadcast TV on St Helena, results from three measurement tools have indicated that young children's behaviour remains very much similar to the behaviour of young children in the immediate period prior to the arrival of TV.

As the St Helena project continues for several more years, it may be premature to seek responses to two questions. Even so, given the results obtained so far, it is worth deliberating upon possible answers. One question asks, 'Why was the social behaviour of young children so exemplary in the pre-TV stage?' The other enquires why behaviour has remained so, some eighteen months after the availability of TV.

Is it feasible that conditions which encouraged good behaviour in the pre-TV stage are the same as (or similar to) those which helped prevent ill-effects arising from TV viewing, so far? If this proves to be the case, what are these conditions? The students' discussion reported in this article suggests one answer.

Students talked about a 'neighbourhood watch' on St Helena, a kind of uncoordinated pastoral network in the community. Their comments implied that this watchfulness becomes translated into individual and collective accountability practices (that is, an obligation to give a reckoning or explanation for one's behaviour). Could this watchfulness and accountability underpin acceptable social behaviour in St Helena, as well as help prevent adverse effects from TV viewing? If they do, a plausible claim could be that in 'watchful' and caring communities, dominant determinants of behaviour do not include TV. At the risk of reinventing

the wheel, it could then be reasoned that most behaviours (antisocial and pro-social) are rooted within the home, the community and the peer group. Children learn to (mis)behave from their 'teachers' in, for example, the community, the school, the peer group and the wider society, although the principal socialising (or teaching) agency is the home. TV has the capacity to become a 'teacher' – and, perhaps, not a very good one – if others (and parents in particular) are unwilling or unable to fulfil their obligations as responsible 'teachers'.

In other words, we should not forget that TV is embedded in a social context, and its influence can be understood only within that context. If TV does influence viewers unfavourably, then it is likely that it is we (as individuals, as a neighbourhood or society) – not the TV – who are to blame. Our technophobic minds have prejudged TV unfairly as a Pandora's box, in much the same way as we view each new technology (such as video games, the Internet and virtual reality). Each technological innovation has been accompanied by an irrational expectation that it will somehow corrupt. Whilst blaming TV for some of society's ills may anaesthetise our own feelings of guilt and sense of ineptitude, it fails to eradicate violent and other antisocial behaviours. What might help are educational experiences which match future needs. The need to learn good parenting skills immediately springs to mind, as does the need to learn how to make good use of TV.

Like other screen-based technologies, TV is a tool which can be used prudently or senselessly. Children can be taught to make good use of it, in the home and the school. For example, parents can:

- help children to plan their viewing by going through the week's programme with them;
- suggest programmes of value which they otherwise might not have considered;
- view with them;
- discuss children's viewing with them;
- for good reasons, say 'No' to a programme, but tell them why.

In school, much as children are taught to become numerate and literate, they can be helped to become 'mediate' or 'TV literate'. Among the ways in which this can be accomplished are curriculum experiences which incorporate:

some of the issues and concerns from pupils' viewing experiences into discussions during personal and social education. Others [may] focus upon helping pupils to become 'television literate' by assisting them to become more critical in their viewing, more able to distinguish between reality and fantasy and be less accepting of viewpoints transmitted, for example, in the news. (Charlton 1996b, p. 204)

Postscript

Future reports from the St Helena project will be monitored with interest to see if pupils' good behaviour is maintained.

If it is, then the thinking outlined earlier becomes more defensible, in which case current perceptions of TV's influence may need to change. In an enlightened society, educational experiences could shift with them.

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