

How Television Socializes Children

The television is a technology that has proliferated through our culture more aggressively than any disease, religion, or political devotion. It is a technology that has changed the way people across the world become socialized, and it has changed the way that culture is exchanged. Even though it is just a box of wires and gadgets, the television has, in so many ways, changed the world. This is what makes it a worthy subject of study at any academic level, as its significance is tremendous. It can be said, particularly in Western culture, that the television set plays a role in the socialization process of the younger, growing generation. Most children sit for hours in front of it, eager to hear what it will say and show next. Even for those children who do not spend countless hours in front of it, it can still be argued that it plays a significant part in their socialization process, merely from the indirect effects - primarily how it influences their peers, and thus themselves. What then, does the television actually do for children in terms of socialization? Is it good? Is it bad? Is it something that any prudent parent should encourage or discourage?

These are not easy questions, but to arrive at an appropriate answer, one must have a better idea of what the television does to the socialization process of children. This essay will introduce how young children acquire strategies within television culture that helps them configure their individual, yet also home-motivated versions of the American dream (let us assume this “dream” applies to Canadians as well). The television industry serves to provide images and messages about the “good life” in our culture, as it functions as a promoter of consumer capitalism as well as an electronic

showcase of democratic politics. From this, it will be clear that, in this kind of television culture, young people find their own specific “symbolic links” that connect their current situations, their possible selves, and the “good lives” into which they want to move.

Media plays an interesting role within our culture; it allows us “to be in the world but not of it” (Lembo, 2000, p. 59). It provides the means for our everyday life to move across borders and boundaries: “between the public and private; between the sacred and the profane; between the front and the back stages; between the realms of the real and the fantastic; between inner and outer reality, the individual and the social” (Lembo, 2000, p. 59). When studying the effects of the media, and specifically television, we need to pay attention to the concept of *play*. This is a space where meaning are created through participation within a space that is usually shared and structured, it is a place that is divergent from our ordinary lives, a place where we can leave our realities, and enter new constructed realities. This is the idea of *play*. Watching television involves us using this idea of *play*. The television has the ability to lure us into *play*.

With the concept of *play* at hand, we can now relate that to the influence of the television. Before we can endeavour to do this though, it is important that we understand and realize the scope of television within our culture (because often we do not realize its scope, even though it is right in front of us). The television is not limited to our homes, our private life. If this was the case, it would undoubtedly be much less influential in our lives. The television plays a prominent role in the public sphere of our environment, whether we know it or not. When we ride the subway, we see television screens broadcasting, when we shop at the local corner store, the proprietor is watching the news in the background, when we wait for treatment at the hospital we are kept occupied with

a television, and when we go to the bank to pay our cable bill, we are given the benefit of watching the business channel with up an up to date stock ticker and business wrap-up for the day (McCarthy, 2001). We cannot escape its influence. How then, does this influence, influence those that are prone to being influenced? With television everywhere, there is no doubt that it changes the way children grow up and the way they become socialized.

Every child is different, as they possess different genes, are different sexes, come from different circumstances, and grow up differently. Each child thinks about different things and faces different obstacles and challenges during their daily routine. Let us present a hypothetical situation of three children, all who have problems with their peer culture in different ways. Just like most children, they all have a desire to feel like they belong to different social groups. But they all have their own sets of challenges in this regard. Child A, a young girl is the object of nasty remarks and peer rejection because of her affinity for hanging out with boys, and her “sexual front.” Child B, a young boy who is new to his community, is rejected and considered an outsider because he lacks specific athletic skills and his fashion falls short of what his peers consider to be cool. Child C is considered somewhat of a tomboy because she likes playing basketball with the boys, also prompting her peers to reject her. These are all common problems faced all across North America but young impressionable children (FisherKeller, 2002).

Where do these children look to find the answers to how to solve their social problems? It is likely that their parents are ill-equipped to provide the proper guidance; as such they look to solve their problems by engaging in *play*, for example, by watching television. Each of these children can acquire the skills needed to respond to their social

problems by looking to TV-culture symbols (FisherKeller, 2002). Child A watches interviews with Madonna, and understands that perseverance and staying true to one's self can pay off. Child B looks to the wisdom of Bill Cosby, and sees how to view situations in a positive light, and make the best of your situation. Child C learns from Candice Bergen that she could learn how to stand up for herself without being frightened, something she found to be very exciting (FisherKeller, 2002). All of these children acquired the social skills they needed from television. Television symbolism gave them a way to negotiate imaginatively personal and social dilemmas associated with their dreams. In this sense, television has socialized these children (FisherKeller, 2002).

The media, and particularly television, because it is by far the medium attended to most by children and teenagers, enter by supplying non-redundant information. Television programming is filled with images and experiences not available locally to most young viewers. When programs pertain to knowledge, beliefs and perceptions for which alternative sources have been absent, television may function as a source of information (Comstock, 1991). Television gives children a way to relate their current situation to that of the greater whole. They are able to place where they are in the world, and ascertain what will be needed for them to achieve the American Dream. As such, television, probably more so than anything else out there, is responsible for the socialization of our children, and the decisions they end up making in their lives.

This essay has introduced how young children acquire strategies within television culture that helps them configure their individual, yet also home-motivated versions of the American Dream. The television industry serves to provide images and messages about the "good life" in our culture, and how to relate a child's current situation with that

perceived “good life.” It is clear that, in this kind of television culture, young people find their own specific symbolic links that connect their current situations, their possible selves, and the good lives into which they want to move.

Bibliography

- Comstock, G. & H. Paik. (1991). *Television and the American Child*. San Diego: Academic Press, Inc.
- Fisherkeller, J. (2002). *Growing up with Television – Everyday Learning Among Young Adolescents*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Fiske, J. (1989). *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Lembo, R. (2000). *Thinking through Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCarthy, A. (2001). *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. Durham: Duke University Press.