

How to Watch TV

The media is the most powerful entity on earth.

Because they control the minds of the masses. ~ Malcolm X



American's watch a lot of TV. Even though we are also obsessed with our phones (texts, tweets, Facebook, email and much more), the average American still finds time to watch more than 5 hours of TV per day.

A tiny fraction of us watch 0 hours of TV each day. I am one of those people. "No TV" includes no cable, no 'smart' TV, no Netflix, no YouTube or other movies (except when I'm on my bicycle-trainer in the basement during inclement weather) and no flat-screen-monitor hanging on the wall in the living room. Or the kitchen. Or the bathroom, bedroom, office, car, etc.

I went so far as far as to get a device that turns TVs off. When I feel attacked or trapped by loud, offensive commercials, news stories or shows being broadcast in public places, I just turn them off. Most people don't notice. Those that do usually just shrug their shoulders and do something else.

I have lived without TV for over 30 years (more than half of my life), so who am I to talk about how to watch television?

I am a concerned citizen; worried about the impact of television has on society. I'm worried how people receive the information (real, fake, mis...they are all 'information): often passively and without question; and I worry about what they do with the information to which they expose themselves. I see Americans getting weaker physically and mentally. I am upset that our schools do not prepare us to defend ourselves against the slippery parts of television such as the crafty ads, the emotionally-charged news stories, and the shallow role models.

Research conducted in 2013 by Thinkbox, a commercial television marketing association, discovered there are six main reasons that people watch television: "to unwind, for comfort, to connect, for an experience, to escape, or to indulge". Many believe that TV is "neutral", that it simply informing us and entertaining us.

Few viewers watch just one show then turn off the TV to pursue creative or useful outlets, such as making homemade cards, changing the oil in the car, or contemplating our ability to meet our needs for belonging and agency. Many viewers turn the TV on and leave it on until they go to bed. Some of us even keep the TV on when we sleep or when we are alone, as if we are somehow safe or connected. With the advent of internet-connected TV's, speakers, etc, we are certainly connected, but not necessarily safer.

Afterall, TV is a thief. It's not the TV's fault - we willingly surrender our time and attention. It robs us of opportunities for reflection, creativity, critical thinking, interesting conversations, and paying attention to other important things in life. Every aspect of TV works hard to hold our attention. We feel compelled to 'stay tuned' while the TV homogenizes our desires, fears, identity and wisdom.

While we are passive and non-critical, those who wish to captivate us - advertisers, scientists, actors, investors, product developers, producers, and many more - are motivated to modifying our behavior. Through video and audio impressions that evoke deep feelings (which we also do not learn about in school), we are supposed to believe that our needs can be met by buying products, services or ideologies.

We can watch TV with others and converse about shows. We can plan our viewing and discipline ourselves to watch only 1 hour or 2 hours per day. We can ask questions. We can free ourselves from 'programming'!

According to media theorist Neil Postman and journalist Steve Powers in their book *How To Watch TV News*, we should consider these principles when watching TV news:

1. Whatever someone says something is, it isn't. What this means is the brief description offered by the news to describe an event does not fully describe the event. Try this with two other people: choose an event you experienced together. Have each person describe the event in two paragraphs. Compare your descriptions. Now consider how that relates to what you 'learn' on the news.

Lesson: Viewers should know that no matter which news they choose, they learn just a fraction of a story.

2. Language operates at various levels of abstraction. Descriptions of one story: Some language describes an event: *In Westby, 6% more votes were cast today than during the previous election.* Some language evaluates an event: *A record number of voters flooded the polls today.* Some language infers an event: *Voters showed up in droves today, demanding to be counted.*

Lesson: Be careful and critical watching the news to hear how the stories are told and punctuated.

3. Almost all words have connotative meanings. Connotation: an idea or feeling that a word invokes in addition to its literal or primary meaning. Example: when we use the word 'judge' we often imply that a person has formed a negative conclusion about something since we rarely use it to describe positive attributes or activities. Ex: "Don't judge me." But when we say "He's really nice", we are still judging him.

Lesson: Critique the words that the news anchors and TV/film actors use, especially words like important, love, reality, judge, relationship, faith, manly/womanly, motherly/fatherly and many others. (Start a list!) Consider if the word is used to evoke a particular feeling, and also if the word has further implications about roles and social expectations.

Fragmented pictures and accompanying music and sound effects: These are used grip your attention and evoke feelings. Pay attention to the music and sounds which provide added tension!

We want to believe that the news is a public service; provided to keep us informed, intelligent and abreast of the events that we need to know about to live in society together. (Aw, wouldn't that be peachy?) But the 'news' is not that at all. The news offers a controlled view of the world; in addition to telling us about events, it entertains us, incites fear, generates money, and is filtered by political perspectives and advertisers. According to Postman and Powers: "The "news" is only a commodity, which is used to gather an audience that will be sold to advertisers."

Activity: Consider where the money (or other influence) is coming from to produce the news, to entertain you, to inform you about history or science or health. (Interesting note: the words *inform* and *information* are not related in any way to *truth* or *validation*) Are they produced by companies with specific messages, ethics or goals? Are they supported exclusively by commercials?

According to Postman and Powers, there are two dimensions of commercials: money and social values.

Money: Advertisers pay for your attention. The shows with the most viewers are news shows. The average American watches over 39,000 commercials in a year.

Social Values: Advertisers want to sell us stuff (or services or ideologies), but to motivate us to buy stuff we don't need, they must make us feel things about ourselves. (If they used logic, we would not be duped in to feeling inadequate, we could see that we could share stuff, and that we could live with less stuff.)

Commercials are “all about serious money”, and they “are also about the serious manipulation of our social and psychic lives” say Postman and Powers. Most commercials have this basic premise: “whatever problem you face (lack of self-esteem, lack of attractiveness, lack of social acceptance) it can be solved, solved fast, and solve through a drug, a detergent, a machine or a saleable technique. One of the reasons commercials are so effective”, they add, is that “people do not usually analyze them.” Life’s problems, including moral dilemmas, “are to be solved through chemistry and technology.”

From *How to Watch TV News*:

For a market economy to work, the population must be made to believe that it is need of continuous improvement. If you are quite satisfied with your teeth, your hair, your 2003 Honda, and your weight, you will not be an avid consumer. The thematic thrust of advertising is to...get you to think about your inadequate self and how you can get better.

Does this cause you look at the advertisements for pharmaceutical drugs any differently?

Activity: Write down the commercials that go along with shows for at least 48 hours. Note the time, the show being watched and the commercials that are either just before, during or immediately after the show. When you’re done, see if you can find a pattern of the types of commercials with the types of shows. What does that tell you about who they think is watching and what they believe they can convince the viewer to purchase or do?

While we sit passively, the marketers, politicians and media organizations plot to persuade us. They hook us through our emotions while trying to convince us we are smart, rational thinkers. (Check out Dr. Zimbardo’s *Resisting Influence* piece in this packet) We believe we have a great deal of choice; that we can’t be that easily controlled; after all there are hundreds of channels! But according to Corporate Research Project, just “five major corporations are the gatekeepers and decision makers for the programming choices of the vast majority of the American people”.

You are in a great position to reflect on the authenticity of shows by considering the ‘reality’ prison shows. I’ve heard that people that they feel they have a greater understanding of prison life by watching these shows. What do you think? Is prison life as they portray it on TV? Is it constantly full of excitement? Does everyone have quick, smart and witty remarks? Do the people where you are - including you - look like the people in the shows? Your answers to these questions are the same answers that apply to all shows: dramas, comedies, reality shows and yes, even the history channel are not like real life.

Here are Postman and Powers’ eight recommendations for what to do when watching TV:

1. *When encountering a news show, you must come with a firm idea of what is important.*
2. *In preparing to watch a TV news show, keep in mind that it is a ‘show’.*
3. *Never underestimate the power of commercials.*
4. *Learn something about the economic and political interests of those who run TV stations.*
5. *Pay special attention to the language of newscasts.*
6. *Reduce by at least one-third the amount of TV news you watch. (Read the news, too!)*
7. *Reduce by one third the number of opinions you feel obligated to have.*
8. *Do whatever you can to get schools interested in teaching children how to watch a TV news show*

How To Watch TV News (2008) by Neil Postman and Steve Powers | Penguin Books NY, NY