

Orthodoxy and the Effects of Television

The spiritual, psychological and ecological effects of television viewing and how these influence parishioners and their ability to address issues of creation

*Train up a child in the way he should go:
and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*

- Proverbs 22:6

Television has done us great damage. It's especially destructive for children.

- Elder Paisios of Mount Athos

Satan has persuaded man to arrange his entire lifestyle so that there is no quiet time, no time for contemplating the past day, week or month. Everything is occupied with entertainment. And in this system of entertainment, television is given the privileged place of honor. The lion's share of free time is 'eaten up' by it, that idol of contemporary civilization. I would call it a cruel despot and tyrant to whom the greater part of mankind is subject in a servitude never before witnessed in the world.

- Elder Anthony of Russia

THE SAINTS, THE FATHERS AND THE ELDERS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH teach that the physical senses are the doorways to the soul. This is why spiritually alert Orthodox Christians emphasize the need for great care in avoiding occasions of sin, the viewing of foul or defiling images, and especially any absorption of images or situations that convey violence, lurid scenes, or depictions of depravity (cf. 1 John 2:16).

In recent decades Orthodox monastic elders have provided an insightful and necessary commentary on how television viewing degrades the soul and inhibits the ability of otherwise faithful church-going people from building up their spiritual life.

While their commentary may not be comprehensive, they sound a warning of how a soul-degrading character exists in the medium of television. In this regard Elder

Anthony of Russia says that television induces a hypnotic effect in which a person loses an ability to think for him- or herself, to perceive in a thoughtful manner the events that are happening, or to form one's own world view. These offenses, he writes, go deep, especially in young people, and have permanent effects.

In a similar way, Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, before the era of television, observes that wrong fixations or sinful experiences while young have long lasting effects because of the depth of the wound to the soul.

Archbishop Vitaly from the former Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia adds that it is urgent for Orthodox to address the problem of television.

Television... has managed to secure a niche for itself in almost every home. Its powers of persuasion and attraction have proved to be practically supernatural and are coupled with a subtle and awesome ability to corrupt. ... Without exaggeration, a campaign against it must be our immediate and primary concern because every day and every hour its effects are being felt in our own homes.

Elder Anthony voices a further concern when he declares that television undermines the authority of the Church. "The method is diabolically cunning. It permeates everything — in mocking of the clergy or the rituals, in placing the occult or paganism in opposition to Christianity, in everything there is hatred for the sacred and for Truth." He adds, "Not much more time will pass before they will openly mock Christianity and holy things on television. The poison of evil will flow from under the veil of humor or comedy. 'Laughing hell' will assume the work of ridiculing everything Divine and spiritual, all the way to the end."

How should we view these commentaries? Don't these monks practically live in caves, isolated from the world of people and public affairs? Like with everything else, our suppositions must be tested. We find a strong confirmation of these claims by psychologists and research scientists who have performed extensive studies on television and its social, psychological, and spiritual effects. If we review these studies, we gain perspective on the revealed perceptions of these holy elders that will allow us to confirm whether or not their insights are consistent with other methods of understanding the world. After all, Saint Irenaeus declares that there is an "irenic" quality to truth, which means that if one thing is true, it will be consistent with all other truth.

Research in several thousand university studies makes clear that from the standpoints of educational performance, physiological development, the ability to relax, the development of cooperative social behavior, and even, as Saint Theophan the Recluse observes regarding the formation of spiritual attitudes, television can be judged as a significant and seriously damaging influence in childhood development.

Dr. Cheryl Pawlowski, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Northern Colorado, determined after exhaustive study that television is a significant retarding force in allowing young people to grasp abstract or complex information.

Kate Moody in a summary of hundreds of studies for *The New York Times* found much more. Her research revealed that habitual television viewing by young people goes deep and affects their basic outlook on life and shapes their lifelong sensibilities. It lessens imagination and ability to play; it distorts language patterns and perceptions of others. It predisposes many of them to violence, anti social behavior, and hyperactivity. It lowers IQ scores, and it affects their self-image. Just a little bit of casual TV watching produces an alteration of brain waves; it also reduces critical eye movements which narrows peripheral vision.

Forty years after the first critical reports about the effects of television, thousands of researchers at numerous institutions are realizing that television is not only more ubiquitous, it exerts harmful affects upon the child, while contributing to a series of radical social, cultural, and spiritual effects. When television viewing occupies a significant amount of time for young people, stimulating conversation and interaction with family members goes into sharp decline. Violence increases. Games become less important. Respect for other people declines. Social structures, family ritual, or regular prayers have less place in the home.

Television cultivates these effects because its pace is faster than real life. Programs accelerate the tempo of events by zipping from scene to scene and speeding sequences to transmit only a skeleton of essential information. By contrast, the pace of normal activities seems slow and boring. Real life becomes drab and uninteresting because it can never move as fast as the events on television. For children, this creates a love of excitement and sensationalism which lends itself to exploration and a quest for “peak” experiences — but without the discernment and value formation that characterized pre-television society. One consequence is that television reared children have a tendency to jump to unfounded conclusions because their television “pace” leaps over essential elements of judgement. Another consequence is a fostering of experimentation with drugs and promiscuity unparalleled in traditional society.

Not only is the pace of television scene sequencing faster than real life, many researchers demonstrate that the TV medium accelerates the nervous system. This means that the unconsciously speed-addicted viewer develops a poor ability to concentrate. This happens because concentration requires discipline and an orderly approach to the world which television does not cultivate nor encourage. Computer games, cell phones, texting and iPods all foster this acceleration of the nervous system. No wonder school teachers show a tight correlation between poor performance in school and the amount of time a child spends watching television. The fact that SAT scores for graduating high school seniors have been on a steady downward slide since 1960 has a lot to do with the rise of television as an entertainment medium.

Commercial television is also a culprit in cultivating a consumer mentality and the materialistic and hedonistic culture. Advertising panders to the passionate desires of the young individual and associates products with images of glamour and prestige which encourage the purchase of unnecessary items. All of this works counter to discipline, counter to a striving for virtue, and counter to the selflessness which Christian attitudes should cultivate.

Significantly, these consequences hold true regardless of program content. Obviously content which portrays violence, crime and sexual promiscuity does nothing to form healthy attitudes to solve the problems of the future. While violent programming should be regarded as a form of visual poison for impressionable young minds, the pace of television is as much the problem as program content. Videos and electronic games, too, regardless of their possibly wonderful content, possess these same features, even though there is no advertising. The internet too, when used as a vehicle for entertainment, cultivates some of these same influences.

The efforts of Congress and private citizens' groups to temper the effects of television have been frustrated by well-funded industry opposition. There is too much money to be made through advertising and maintaining this "drug" of the consumer society to allow a relaxation of its hold on society.

Other studies elaborate on these conclusions. They show that television viewing retards learning and lowers reading skills; it reduces the ability of young people to penetrate issues in proportion to the time they spend in front of the television; it inhibits the development of imagination, creativity and sociable personalities; it provides information, but it fails to teach analysis, discernment, initiative, or values. It conditions an expectation of instant gratification and decreases an ability to focus and maintain attention. TV contributes to the problems of inner city poverty, teenage pregnancy, drug use, and the decline of moral standards. Amoral "video values" develop a thick-skinned, cynical, hedonistic and detached attitude toward life which parents are often unable to address. Older school teachers, who remember an era of higher student performance, remark that television's influence now requires teachers to be entertaining so that they can compete with the attention-grabbing styles of television. These qualities produce what the fathers call "stony insensibility," a form of hardness of heart which television cultivates. This also has the effect of causing insensitivity to environmental desecration because without a feeling heart, people become insulated from the pain of others and unmoved by the pain of God's creation.

Television is also a culprit in causing many Orthodox young people to fall away from the life of the Church. The problem is that as young people (and their parents too) become desensitized to the spiritual world, there is little capacity for outrage over the loss of Christian moral standards. As young people are weakened in their ability to discern spiritually, they become vulnerable to all sorts of pseudo-religious and psychic allurements in place of their Orthodox heritage. To repeat a crucial point, *the medium is as much the problem as inappropriate program content.*

Because the medium is as much of a problem as inappropriate content, efforts to moderate content do little to protect young people from the pernicious influences of this powerful force for mental and spiritual degradation. A result is that our television-addicted society is producing a generation so used to viewing violence and crime that many young people fall easily into a growing epidemic of aggressive behavior. Predictably, they are increasingly hardened to religion, morality, civic responsibility or the plight of created nature.

The use of the word “addiction” is intentional – and often used in the literature analyzing television viewing. Former Under Secretary of Education Dr. Linus Wright affirms this conclusion: “Television is addicting, like tobacco, and parents should never let their children get hooked.” Studies show that the lure of television is actually most powerful in its influence on those who are lonely, alienated, or who dislike self-examination and confrontation with the root causes of their difficulties.

Television also exerts a major influence in the shaping of culture. It has already caused a loss of regional diversity, a homogenization of language and increased exposure to profane language. Television also reduces our vocabulary. In 1950 the average fourteen-year-old had a vocabulary of about 25,000 words, but that has now shrunk to roughly 11,000 words in less than sixty years.

While the effects of TV on individual behavior are well substantiated, it also influences attitudes toward consumerism and materialism. It should be clear that television is more than a means for entertainment; it is an instrument of commerce. While simple logic recognizes the value of consuming less, television advertising relentlessly encourages greater consumption. “Buy now!” “Don’t Wait!” In fact, on many channels, nearly 30% of broadcast time is devoted to advertising.

As the leading proponent of consumerism, television is especially adept at creating cultural images of affluence, convincing us that items we once thought of as luxuries have now become necessities. Children are often a prime target of advertisers as they are the most impressionable and vulnerable. “Children,” marketing guru James McNeal bluntly declares, “are consumers in training.”

Using sophisticated research techniques, television programmers and advertisers conjure up an image of life in America that is built around things rather than human relationships or values. Their marketing techniques distort moral values and skew our vision of propriety or prosperity. This leads us further and further away from the way of life of faithful Orthodox Christians. For instance, television programs imply that prosperous people have promiscuous sexual relations more frequently. They promote an illusion of profits and money as more important than honest and thoughtful relationships. They try to convince us that monetary wealth frees us from social constraints. But they do not show how these unbridled assumptions produce a terrible drain on the planet’s resources and degrade both the individual and the environment.

Even television's portrayal of nature is distorted. Ron Powers, writing in *Audubon* magazine, says that nature programs trivialize the natural world by reducing its wonders to the same formula that sells the rest of the commercial spectrum: violence and sex. He shows that a sizeable portion of nature programming focuses upon predators stalking their prey, the action of the chase and capture, the bizarre and the unique, or perhaps mating rituals.

"Most nature films are like sports highlight films," notes Bill McKibbin, a commentator on nature and television themes. "Only the most exciting scenes are shown, but this distorts nature's rhythms, pace, scope, and diversity."

A crucial consideration is that nature moves really slow. As television quickens the human pace, respect and caring for creation becomes harder to connect to our emotional make-up. This is because television synchronizes our internal psychic "pace" to the artificial world of hot rods, freeways, computers, air travel, and everything else that is fast-paced, action-packed, and accelerated. It attunes the human brain and nervous system to the lightning speed of electronic systems. As the human nervous system speeds up, it moves too fast to feel calm, too fast to read, sometimes too fast to relate meaningfully to other people or to the upliftment of liturgical services. Nature, by contrast, seems like an old-fashioned slowpoke.

Television is creating people who are handicapped in their ability to relate to the natural environment. This is because they become conditioned to fast movement and to an expectation of instant action. A series of consequences result from this artificially hyperactive condition: They become impatient. They have difficulty connecting to the slow pace of nature, and so they fail to appreciate its beauty and the richness of its life. They have a much harder time relating to others compared to their peers from earlier eras. Perhaps most significant for their life in the Church, their addiction to speed makes it difficult for them to develop sensitivity to the presence of Christ in the Liturgy.

The evidence is piling up and sufficiently clear that we can make several definitive conclusions: First, if we are going to turn the corner on the deepening problem of weakened spiritual formation, youth migration from the Church, addiction to materialism and consumerism, and a growing disengagement from creation, we have to make decisive corrections in our relationship to television.

Second, the holy elders of monastic life are right on target! Their prayer and inspiration has led them to identify television as a crucial force that degrades our homes, renders our young people vulnerable to the materialist messages of society, and weakens our ability to stand fast in the Christian life.

Third, the life of the Church is assaulted through television. This happens not so much through programming content, but through the very method of communication.

To address the pernicious influences of television, here are some remedial actions that you can take. These apply both to home and parish life:

- ◆ Learn the consequences of television-viewing on behavior, mental performance, health, and sociability. Establish a parish study group on television. Look particularly at television's social impacts on people, especially young people.
- ◆ Encourage children into other activities such as going outside or engaging in imaginative play instead of watching television.
- ◆ Establish a TV diet. For adults especially this means a restriction of television viewing to pre-selected programs, perhaps news, special features, cultural and sporting events and programs of an educational nature.
- ◆ Balance viewing time with reading, social, or outdoor activity time. Make sure that you turn off the television when finished with your pre-selected viewing.
- ◆ Examine the responsibility of the pastor and the local parish in relation to television. What are the responsibilities? Let parish members participate in this discussion.
- ◆ Analyze commercials with children. Help them evaluate the claims made about products. Teach them to recognize exaggerated claims. Point out that the makers of the products pay for advertising.
- ◆ Turn off the commercials if you watch TV programs. Their only purpose is to alter your thinking and sell products that you would not otherwise buy.
- ◆ Be aware that watching TV violence can be harmful, especially to the mental health and peace of children.
- ◆ Discuss the value of an annual parish TV-turnoff time, perhaps during Great Lent or during times of strict fasting.
- ◆ Write your political representative and ask that violence and promiscuity be eliminated from TV. You might also request that all advertising which targets and exploits children be halted.

Please recognize that this article is not calling for the elimination of television. It is already too much a part of daily life for most parishioners. Besides, studies show that a "cold turkey" approach is not effective and can be counter-productive, especially for young people. Rather it is more effective to temper and moderate its influence.

Besides the influences that are noted in this report, television produces other influences that stretch beyond the list presented here. These include the sedentary

lifestyle that television cultivates; the tendency to not get enough exercise; the unhealthy, overweight condition that results; the disabling sleep disturbances that it can cause; and its particularly strong hold upon senior citizens. It also emphasizes new “in” styles and dress fads. None of these effects of television viewing benefit the life and spiritual striving of the Orthodox Christian.

While the case is clear that television harms young people and adults alike, most parents ignore this information. Sadly a 2006 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that the “generation of parents raised on television is encouraging the early use of television, video games, and computers by their own children.”

If you want to learn more about the problems with television, start by reading articles that discuss this issue. This can bring you to a deeper awareness of television as a powerful, but spiritually crippling communications medium. You might consider encouraging a class or parish discussion series on the evidence in this report. The more you study the implications of television, the more informed you will be and the better you can serve your family, your parish, your community, and God’s good creation.

To repeat what has already been stated, this article does not declare that television must be completely avoided. Its message is that overuse degrades the soul and corrupts the mind, especially for those who habitually watch soul-deadening programs. Those who become addicted to television then become easy prey to a variety of negative and sinful spiritual, social, cultural, and environmental actions.

If there is going to be healing in our society, thoughtful Orthodox Christians will need to set an example of overcoming in themselves an addiction to television. This will clarify the mind and aid one’s striving to become a better example of a right relationship to Jesus Christ, our neighbors, and the Lord’s good earth.

In the corner [of the home], where the holy icons now hang, there will stand captivating devices which will delude the people. Many will say, 'We need to watch and listen to the news.' And behold, in the news the Antichrist will appear. He will mark his people with the seal, and he will hate Christians.

- Blessed Elder Lawrence of Chernigov (Russia)

Just as we injure ourselves by looking at something harmful with our physical eyes, so we injure ourselves by looking at what is harmful with our mind. We must therefore pay special attention to guarding the eye of the soul and take particular care to prevent its being injured, lest its diseased condition become the cause of our spiritual ruin.

- St. Hesychius of Jerusalem

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Note: The full text of this essay together with citations and additional commentary is available through The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration. Please inquire for ordering information. Elaboration on each citation plus many pages of expanded analysis and discussion are available for all of the facts, quotes and information contained in this article.

