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## TV: THE SURROGATE SOCIETY

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The term *backstory* is used to refer to the events that led up to the story about to be told. The backstory of this analysis follows: When people move to a new home, many plug the television into the wall socket before unpacking the glasses, the shirts and the pictures; many turn on the television the moment they arise in the morning, first thing when they return home in the evening and listen to it as they drift into blissful sleep. Many feel closer to their extended TV family than to closest blood relatives, people next door or both. While many cannot adequately face the day without the morning newspaper, others feel the need for their daily fix of "Magnum", "Dallas" or "General Hospital". Friends, families and perhaps the individuals themselves do not fully understand this need for contact with safe, unending, familiar surrogate familial contact.

Most television would be considered low culture, based upon an aesthetic analysis. This inquiry will ignore aesthetic consideration of television programming and will examine a use of television as a dysfunctional socialization factor—a less useful social function of TV.

The evidence presented within this report will be anecdotal. Those readers familiar with *Being There* written by Jerzy Kozinski and popularized on film by Peter Sellers in the role of Chance Gardener, recall that Chance watched TV all the time. His education was based on television. His life was based on television. In several instances an individual may become overly dependent upon television as a source of companionship and information as did Chance.



The expanding reach of community antenna television companies (CATV) serviced through modern satellite technology presents a unique challenge to monolingual English speakers who attempt to assimilate into societies where English is not the primary language of social interaction and commerce. Cable TV may offer individuals a society which replaces the actual social environment thus creating dysfunctional reinforcement of pre-existing social norms, language use and friendship and companionship needs.

### *General Statistics —Chilling Reality*

In 1949, only 2.3% of the homes in the United States had television. By 1954, over 50% had TV. Today, "more families have TV than have a refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, telephone or indoor plumbing."<sup>1</sup> Ninety-eight percent of the homes which have television and the more than 50% which have two or more enjoy that medium in excess of seven hours per day. Fifteen years ago the average home television was on 5.5 hours per week.<sup>2</sup> The average person spends just five hours per year reading but watches 1,200 hours of TV.<sup>3</sup> North American children watch an average of 3.5 hours per day, which comes to roughly 20,000 commercials per year. Preschoolers watch an average of 32-33 hours per week, teenagers only watch an average of 24 hours per week and those 55 years of age and over watch an average of 38 hours per week.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps a better illustration of the omnipresence and the power of television in the United States may be found in comparisons. Santa Claus is the most identifiable personality to the largest number of people. The second most identifiable is Ronald McDonald. A group of children were polled on the question, "Who do you like better, TV or Daddy?" Forty four percent responded that they preferred TV.<sup>5</sup> Television is more than merely a home appliance; it has become part —an im-

<sup>1</sup> Samuel L. Becker, *Discovering Mass Communication* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1983), p. 323.

<sup>2</sup> Becker, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup> Horace Newcomb, *Television: The Critical View*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1979), p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Becker, p. 323.

<sup>5</sup> Becker, p. 323.

portant part— of the family. This cornucopia shaped tube exists in 98% of all dwellings for at least 25% of the average day. The 30,000 lines of information that comprise the picture provide the public a surrogate audio-visual-mediated reality.

### *Dysfunctional Television*

Lazarsfeld and Merton identify three functions of television: 1) status conferral, 2) enforcement of social norms and 3) a narcotizing dysfunction.<sup>6</sup> It is the third function, or perhaps more correctly, dysfunction, with which this analysis is concerned. In the United States a number of individuals demonstrate dysfunctional social behaviors due, in part, to the presence of the mass media. These behaviors may be emphasized in cultures where English language television is available but English is not the primary language. There are instances where the availability of English language television programming exceeds the availability of programming in the dominant language of the society. Puerto Rico may be the most extreme example of a society that is linguistically Spanish with English as a strong second language. This is changing rapidly with the advent of satellite technology. The major media centers are located in the United States, primarily in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Atlanta. "Abroad, there is a concern among developing nations that the industrial powers may monopolize the available frequencies and space available for satellites, leaving them in a perpetual communication dependence."<sup>7</sup> This dependence upon English language programming is a blessing and a curse to monolingual English speakers living in non-English speaking areas. On the one hand, it provides those individuals with comfortable entertainment and escape. On the other hand, this programming also provides a potential dysfunctional use of media that prevents the individual from social integration into the culture.

<sup>6</sup> Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, revised edition (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 554-578.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Rutherford Smith, *Beyond the Wasteland*, revised edition (Annandale, Virginia: Erick Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication, 1980), p. 85.



## Social Alienation

When circumstances are altered for an individual, the ways in which that individual approaches others is also altered.

Most of us experience some sort of culture shock upon entering social situations where familiar constraints on communication are absent.<sup>8</sup>

One example of this might be when an individual divorces and attempts to reenter the world of dating. The highly defined rules of the marriage are absent and the new rules are unclear and often quite confusing. Another example is when an individual moves into a culture where the rules and the language are unknown. Individuals in an environment different from their native environment have a choice of assimilation or alienation. The familiarity of the home environment may breed alienation with regard to the new environment. The individual recalls the positive attributes of the prior social situation and ignores the negative aspects. At the same time, the negative aspects of the current situation are maximized.

Becker indicates that mass media may function to integrate an individual into the new community.<sup>9</sup> However, mass media may also function in a reverse fashion to prevent assimilation by functioning as a means of escape. The Gestalt psychology rule of good forming explains this phenomenon. When the individual moves into an unfamiliar social structure there is often a desire to retain the comforts of the prior comfortable social structure—a desire to live in a prior reality or a reality that is old and comfortable—a reality that makes sense. When a circle is not continuous but rather a series of dots, the individual fills in the dots or connects the dots to create a continuous linear figure. When the dots in an individual's social reality do not constitute an acceptable social reality,

<sup>8</sup> Dennis K. Davis and Stanley J. Baran, *Mass Communication and Everyday Life: A Perspective on Theory and Effects* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc., 1981), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Becker, p. 391.

the individual seeks additional dots to create a reality, a sense of security, rationality and day to day survival.

Imagine a hermit... who lives in a cave linked to the outside world by a television set... His knowledge of the world would be built exclusively out of the images and facts he could glean from the fictional events, persons, objects and places that appear on television. His expectations and judgements about the ways of the world would follow conventions of TV programs with their predictable plots and outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of television is that of changing channels. When the reality of the culture is not satisfactory to the needs of the individual, that individual has the capacity to change channels. That channel change is, however, a change from existence to mediated or secondary existence. TV alienates.

All mass media in the end alienate people from personal experience and, though appearing to offset it, intensify their moral isolation from each other, from reality and from themselves. One may turn to the mass media when lonely or bored. But mass media, once they become a habit, impair the capacity for meaningful experience. Though more diffuse and not so gripping, the habit feeds on itself, establishing a vicious circle as addictions do.<sup>11</sup>

## Believability

In 1938 Orson Wells spoke to the people of the United States and told them that Martians had landed. The public believed him. Other effects of mass media were also noted that year.

E.B. White witnessed a T.V. demonstration and wrote "a door closing, heard over the air, a face contorted, seen in a panel of light, these will emerge as the real and the true. And when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face, the impression will be mere artifice."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), p. 255.

<sup>11</sup> *Mass Media and Mass Man*, edited by Alan Casty (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Douglass Cater, "The Intellectual in Videoland" in *Readings in Mass Communication: Concepts and Issues in the Mass Media*, edited by Michael Emery and



Other examples of the believability of media include Hitler's propaganda campaign and the Danish decline in the suicide rate as a result of mass media penetration into the society.<sup>13</sup>

Many of our experiences are not primary, direct or real in the truest sense. Instead, they are secondary, indirect and unreal. Indeed, televised and other mediated experience may be considered second-hand living. Most would agree that man went to the moon. Most would agree that there was a war in Vietnam. Most did not directly participate in either of these events. These events happened—they are true—because we saw them on TV and in other media. Seeing is believing. How many have seen Ronald McDonald live? How many doubt that promotional entity? Imagine Magnum, Bill Cosby, Dick Clark and Ronald Reagan. Most do not know these individuals on a personal basis. We may erase them from our minds. We may bring them back. They exist even though we have never experienced them directly. How can an individual distinguish between Ronald McDonald and Ronald Reagan? How can an individual determine which is real? The intellectual ability to differentiate between the two does not remove them from the realm of reality.

The television set becomes a new instrument of reality —of "what's happening" in the larger, rational world, of "where it's at." In some sense what isn't on television isn't quite real.<sup>14</sup>

The reality of the media involves the appearance of an individual, an event and a place which tends to make those people, places and events more real. This is because "as a news medium as well as an entertainment medium we may tend to perceive all of what we get from the medium as more 'real' than we would otherwise perceive it to be."<sup>15</sup> Worldwide pro-

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Ted Curtis Smyth, fourth edition (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Company Publishers, 1981), p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Newcomb, p. 312.

<sup>15</sup> Becker, p. 325.

gramming via satellite communications has established a new real time that illustrates synthetic reality. When Muhammad Ali fought in Zaire, the start time, in Zaire, to accommodate New York audiences, was 4:00 a.m.<sup>16</sup>

Television teaches expectations. It teaches an individual to expect others to act and react in certain ways at certain times. It teaches that life should be exciting. There is a bias in TV programming that highlights the action and high points and minimizes, avoids and ignores the low points except in terms of plot formulae.

When you sit down in a cafe with a friend, you don't need to have an orgasm for the experience to be worthwhile. Perhaps nothing will happen in that hour or two. No exclamations of passion. No news of dire events. No shoot-outs at the next table or in the street.<sup>17</sup>

Emphasis upon the highlighting of excitement often results in an attitude that our lives are more boring and dull than those of other better adjusted individuals in the society. Individuals may become dysfunctional in terms of social behavior when they attempt to utilize the behavioral patterns learned from the media.

In many cases, our problems with framing everyday experience arise because we have allowed media content to alter our use of everyday codes. When we experience problems because of how we use these codes, we often turn to the creator of the problem—the media—for solutions.<sup>18</sup>

One particular area where dysfunction may occur is communication. In social situations where the language that is used in day to day transactions differs from the language of the viewer of the programming, the dysfunction may be increased. The individual may be less likely to disclose information about his or her self or to engage in phatic or other incidental communication. This unwillingness to converse is

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<sup>16</sup> Cater, p. 272.

<sup>17</sup> Mander, p. 313.

<sup>18</sup> Davis and Baran, p. 81.



most likely to occur with "unfamiliar others or others in public situations."<sup>19</sup>

Another dysfunction may occur in terms of play or storytelling. In early school years certain skills and bits of information are acquired in the classroom. Others are learned in the halls, in the lunchroom, on the ballfield and in the playground during recess. "And yet we often discount recess. Play is somehow less socially worthy than work. Recess is seen as somehow less meaningful than school."<sup>20</sup> Children were once more dependent upon peers for information, stories, jokes and myths than the youth of today. Without the omnipresence of television, children entertained themselves. Children are no longer dependent upon each other for these forms of entertainment.

We no longer turn to friends as often as did earlier generations. We know that if we push the button on a television set... we will find stories that are more exciting and absorbing than stories told by others. We have come to expect that stories will entertain us in certain ways, and everyday stories usually fail to do this.<sup>21</sup>

Play is a necessary human behavior. When television intervenes in play behavior, the individual may lose touch with social reality and come to rely upon mediated reality. Many individuals play *dress-up* when watching programs like "Miami Vice" to determine if a particular style of dress is right for them. Many individuals *hang out with the guys* by having a vicarious beer at any of the local bars on television. Fascination with automobiles offers an opportunity to *play with toys*. When televised versions replace real versions, the individual may become dysfunctional. When TV becomes more real than reality and provides a surrogate social structure for the individual, that individual may become less able to interact with other live individuals.

<sup>19</sup> Davis and Baran, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Davis and Baran, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Davis and Baran, p. 128.

### *The Loyal Visitor*

The adage that "misery loves company" often applies to those who rely upon television to supply that company. These include "shut-ins and elderly persons who live alone, or other people who have difficulty in normal, face to face interactions with other people."<sup>22</sup> Individuals often attempt, through the use of media, to maintain some sort of status quo within themselves, some remembrance of a time when they had such face to face interaction before new circumstances set them adrift from that prior reality.

In a confusing society, with grounding lost and expectations sinking, we have the television itself as the guru-hypnotist-leader, opening a clear channel into surrogate clarity. Always constant... whatever the action, the gestalt continues, program after program, one program merging into the next, images follow images, the wider world a distant shadow. There is no need to do more than follow the images, hear the voices, watch the cycle of realities building and then resolving, program after program.<sup>23</sup>

This ritualization of reality, mediated through television, provides meaning and continuity. "Occasionally the media function for many of us as a substitute for social interaction. They provide companionship or vicarious interaction."<sup>24</sup> In situations where there is a significant alteration or change in the social structure, there will be a period of adjustment. Individuals become accustomed to particular behaviors, manners and attitudes. The individuals who do not readily adjust to new and different forms of information will attempt to perpetuate the status quo. Tony Schwartz offers the comparison with a construction worker.

A carpenter, working with a new assistant after several months with someone else, will hear the new assistant's hammering—whereas the old assistant seemed to make no sound at all. The pace of the hammering will be different, and it will require some time before he can absorb the pattern of the new hammering sound as part of his envi-

<sup>22</sup> Becker, p. 396.

<sup>23</sup> Mander, p. 199.

<sup>24</sup> Becker, p. 396.



ronment rather than attend the sound as new auditory information.<sup>25</sup>

It is when the individual does not adjust to the new sound, the new patterns and the new communication skills required in the social structure that the individual may become alienated from the society. When the individual confuses reality with mediated reality—when the individual confuses Tony on “I Dream of Jeannie” with J.R. Ewing on “Dallas” without realizing that both characters are played by Larry Hagman, the son of Mary Martin, the son of the person who portrayed “Peter Pan”—the individual may become dysfunctional. It is when the individual looks forward to the appearance of television as a loyal visitor more than to the appearance of real living guests that the person becomes socially dysfunctional.

### *A Shortcut Home*

When the New York Giants football team played in New York during the 1986 Baseball World Series there were a number of times when the crowd cheered at what appeared to be inappropriate times causing delays and penalties. These occurred because a large number of the individuals in the stadium were listening to or watching the World Series game during the football game played by the Giants. These individuals doubled up on their sports activities because: 1) they had tickets for the football game and/or 2) there were no tickets available for the baseball game and/or 3) they did not have two television sets at home to watch both activities and/or 4) the football game was blacked out in New York. The blackout of sporting activities has become an important factor in professional sports in recent years because decreasing numbers of individuals prefer to attend live sporting events.

We've reached the point now where people—adults and children alike—would prefer to watch a televised ball game than to sit in some far corner of a stadium, too hot or too cold, uncomfortable,

<sup>25</sup> Schwartz, p. 33.

surrounded by a smelly crowd, with no close-ups, no other channels to turn to. Uncomfortable—like life often is.<sup>26</sup>

Sporting events are only one example of how media clients opt for the comfortable, the stereotypical, the mythic. The stereotype and the myth are means of achieving cultural comfort and cultural transmission. “Not merely shortcuts to understanding; they are shortcuts to emotions.”<sup>27</sup> The individual holds on to those understandings after the cultural contact is gone.

It is a guarantee of our self respect; it is the projection on the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.<sup>28</sup>

Stereotypes and myths provide a source of comfort for individuals in social situations that are alien or new. “A major social problem occurs... (when) the individual tends to rely too much on stereotypes for a view of the world.”<sup>29</sup> The individual sees the values of the comfortable social structure portrayed in the media and fails to understand why that structure differs from the other—mythic—structure of the nonfamiliar society. The individual uses the myths and the stereotypes from the familiar social structure to determine self, other individuals and the general social rules. The individual may become dysfunctional in the society as the functional rules of the mediated reality fail to be operative in that society.

One particular use of myths is humor. In language acquisition, humor is one of the last skills to be acquired. Thus, an individual will continue to seek familiar types of humor through comedy in his or her primary language even after basic functional language skills are obtained.

<sup>26</sup> Jerzy Kozinski interviewed by David Sohn in “A Nation of Videots,” *Media and Methods* (April, 1975).

<sup>27</sup> Frederick C. Whitney, *Mass Media and Mass Communications in Society* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Company Publishers, 1975), p. 400.

<sup>28</sup> Lippman in Whitney, p. 400.

<sup>29</sup> Whitney, p. 401.



There is comfort as well as fun in these comedies... No wonder that we welcome them, that we are sorry when they end, for besides entertaining us, the sit-coms tell us what we had hoped all along was true: that it is for our faults we are loved, really, not in spite of them.<sup>30</sup>

The situation comedies fulfill social needs of the displaced individual. They provide comfort, offer comic relief from a situation that is not humorous and they return us to a social home that does not tax our abilities with the language or the society.

When an individual returns to the television home he or she finds surrogate family and friends—people that are identifiable and share a common mythical heritage. In this mediated reality the individual finds a place in the social structure that does not exist in the prevailing social reality.

Suddenly the characters of the mass media become actual for us, not just electronic blips or celluloid reflections. They are people, and we are in their presence. We can identify with them, laugh with them, cry with them, fear for them, love them, and despise them. We can be concerned about their futures, try to solve their problems for them, and see them as living the life we would live if only we had the ambition, luck or courage to do so.<sup>31</sup>

There is a perceived reality in these individuals and situations that is transferred from the character portrayed or the actress or actor. From "Father Knows Best" to "Marcus Welby, M.D." to resident coffee expert, Robert Young is a comfort. He is trustworthy. He is reliable.

Although critics complain about the stereotyped characters and plots of TV dramas, many viewers look on them as representatives of the real world. Anyone who questions that assertion should read the 250,000 letters, most containing requests for medical advice, sent by viewers to "Marcus Welby, M.D.", during the first five years of his practice on television.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Newcomb, pp. 62-63.

<sup>31</sup> Davis and Baran, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Mander, p. 255.

Robert Young is not a unique example. Many actors and actresses have provided companionship, familiar voices, faces, values, habits, patterns of behavior and social circumstances. Products as well as characters provide security for the viewer. All "evoke memories of similar persons and problems we have encountered in our work, our families and our dreams."<sup>33</sup>

The guest villain in any program allows the individual to substitute any current villain. Cultural stereotypes further this attitude by demonstrating or reinforcing particular attitudes or behaviors observed by the individual. Friendships may be vicariously formed with media characters. An individual may see such characters as Magnum and his friends as best friends with whom, on a regular basis, he or she may interact. The same may be true of Rowdy Yates, Cagney and Lacey or even the Flintstone family and their friends, the Rubbles.

Fantasy replacement for love relationships may substitute media characters for real human beings. For example, a 1979 film entitled "Starting Over" featured Burt Reynolds and Jill Clayborne. The film deals with the topic of separation and offers the consolation that there is always another chance. An individual may emotionally identify with Burt Reynolds and experience vicarious emotions through the more normal relationships portrayed rather than attempting relationships with persons who vary significantly from that individual in experiential history with whom that person seems to have little in common. Even antagonistic relationships such as those portrayed in "Moonlighting" offer security.

Other fantasy lifestyles include familial relationships such as "Ozzie and Harriet", (Hi Rick! Hi Mom! Hi Dad!), "Father Knows Best", "The Waltons", and even "The Munsters" and "The Flintstones." Other genres include community, exemplified by "The Flintstones" and "Andy Griffith" and work environment situations like "WKRP", "The Bob Newhart Show" and "Dick Van Dyke." These programs offer the disenfranchised individuals a shortcut back to a more comfortable, albeit a mediated, reality. And, perhaps most importantly, they are there when we need them.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, p. 17.



## The Final Frontier

Manifest destiny remains a significant part of the psyche of Americana. It is virtually impossible for the North American to accept that there is no escape to the west, to the moon, to new open territory. Individuals constantly attempt to expand their vista. Recently, a colorization process has been applied to many classical films, including *The Maltese Falcon*. However, films, originally envisioned and created in black, white and shades of grey cannot evoke the same memories, images and responses when viewed in color.

Our experiences with electronic media are coded and stored in the same way that they are perceived... the experience is not stored in a symbolic form, it cannot be retrieved by symbolic cues. It must be evoked by a stimulus that is coded in the same way as the stored information is coded.<sup>34</sup>

Much in the same way that Bogart isn't the same with pink cheeks, Fred Flintstone is the same as he was twenty years ago.

## Conclusions

Individuals often seek escape. Some do it through books, music, drugs or some other private means. They seek a comfortable reality—a land of milk and honey—the homeland. This homeland may be physical health, youth, prior residence or some other form of social reality. With media, we override our Euclidian, geometric world and enter into a new environment. Phil Spector called this a "wall of sound." Tony Schwartz called it "auditory acoustic space." These are audio oriented terms. Inclusion of video media might indicate a more appropriate term. That term would be audio visual mediated reality.

The walling of awareness alters the senses. Just as sidewalks replace earthen paths, perfect silk plants replace foliage, pictures replace windows, carpet replaces lawn, light bulbs re-

<sup>34</sup> Schwartz, p. 24.

place the sun, moon and stars, fans replace the wind and faucets replace streams; TV replaces life and media characters replace friends and other social contacts.

Does this report call for the elimination of television? There is within this analysis a catalog of negative and dangerous effects of the media. There are "mental, physiological, ecological, economic, political effects that are dangerous to the person and also to the society and the planet."<sup>35</sup> David Bowie portrays a character in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* who has arrived on Earth and becomes preoccupied and obsessed with television. It becomes his life and at one point he screams at the dozens of TV sets in his bedroom, "Stop it, get out of my mind, go back where you came from."

Many products and services, such as media, have been controlled by social conscience. Drugs, alcohol and other products and the advertising of those products have been and continue to be controlled in various parts of the world. Should TV be prohibited, controlled or allowed to program toward the status quo?

In the final analysis, "Many people watch television because it is more pleasant than not watching television."<sup>36</sup> Television is pleasant. Yet, for the viewer there must be an awareness that television is not real. The situations that are portrayed are not real. They are tainted with dramatic expertise. "The medium influences the message in the same way that a rusty pipe colors the water that flows through it."<sup>37</sup> Just as the water that passes through the pipes must often be boiled or otherwise purified, the images on television must be carefully considered before consumed.

<sup>35</sup> Mander, p. 348.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, p. 97.



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