

# HOW THE BOMBARDING IMAGES OF TV CULTURE UNDERMINE THE POWER OF WORDS

*By Douglas R. Groothuis*

*TV Guide* published a short manifesto, actually an advertisement by ABC – on the goodness of television, just in case anyone doubted it.

For years the pundits, moralists and self-righteous, self-appointed preservers of our culture have told us that television is bad. They've stood high on their soapbox and looked condescendingly on our innocuous pleasure ...

Well, television is not the evil destroyer of all that is right in this world. In fact, and we say this with all the disdain we can muster for the elitists who purport otherwise – TV is good.

TV binds us together. It makes us laugh. Makes us cry. Why, in the span of ten years, TV brought us the downfall of an American president, one giant step for mankind and the introduction of Farrah Fawcett as one of 'Charlie's Angels.' Can any other medium match TV for its immediacy, its impact, its capacity to entertain?

Indeed, no one can dispute television's unrivalled immediacy, impact, and entertainment capabilities. But it is exactly these features that make it a potent agent of truth decay in postmodernity. Television is an unreality appliance that dominates our mentality. We then take this unreality mentality and impose on the rest of the real world. That is, we (mis)understand the world in terms of the mentality inherent to the form of communication that is television.

In my writing, I have distinguished between postmodernity as a truth-decaying social condition and postmodernism as a truth-decaying philosophy, as well as emphasizing that these reinforce each other in various ways. One primary engine or dynamo for truth decay is the cultural system of television. I will highlight five ways in which television contributes to the loss of truth, and then give three practical suggestions for overcoming these effects.

Television seldom, if ever, directly addresses postmodernist philosophy (or any other philosophy). However, its very nature contributes to a loss of truth by reinforcing certain crucial themes in postmodernism. Television has become a commercial and cultural institution in American life; as such, it is unproblematic to the vast majority of Americans and, therefore, highly influential. Theologian Jacques Ellul is right that ‘Television acts less by the creation of clear notions and precise opinions and more by enveloping us in a haze.’ New York University professor Neil Postman captures our sad situation: ‘Television has achieved the status of a ‘meta-medium’’ – an institution that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of the *ways of knowing* as well.’ While many have noticed – and object to – the content of television fare (too much sex, violence, anti-Christian material, etc.), television’s ‘nature as a medium’ is largely ignored, thereby granting it a kind of epistemological immunity from criticism. Yet Scripture calls us to ‘test everything. Hold fast to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.’(1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

The medium of communication matters since it always shapes the messages it carries, and these mediated messages shape us. A novel and a television series based on a novel differ in crucial ways, for example. Therefore, any medium should be exegeted to determine its nature, function, and structure. Only in this way can we ascertain what it does well, what it cannot do, and what it does poorly. This is what Marshall McLuhan meant by his hyperbolic slogan, ‘the medium is the message.’ Taking his cue from the discussion of idolatry in Psalm 115, McLuhan also remarked that, ‘We become what we behold’ (see also Psalm 1). When we become habituated to a particular form of communication, our mentalities and sensibilities bear its mark.

A raft of studies from several decades indicate that we in the West consume vast quantities of television – an average of about four to five hours per day, with many taking in much more. Televisions are also becoming nearly omnipresent, imperialistically colonizing automobiles, airports, restaurants, classrooms, bars, day care centres, and computers. They are even being placed on some gasoline pumps. Once, while attempting to explain a family member’s stroke-like symptoms in the ‘triage’ area of a hospital emergency room, I found myself competing with a blaring television. After I turned it off (without asking permission), the attendant behind the check-in desk huffily turned it back on. Nearly one hundred percent of American homes have at least one television, and three out of four have more than one.

Eighty-four percent of households have at least one VCR. Many have elaborate home theatres costing thousands of dollars. And half of all Americans say they watch too much television!

### **The Image Over the Word: Discourse in Distress**

What is there about the nature of the television medium that shapes its message? First, television emphasizes the moving image over written and spoken language. It is image-driven, image-saturated, and image-controlled. This is precisely what television does that books, recordings, and pictures cannot do; it brings us visual action. However, when the image dominates the word, rational discourse ebbs. We are attracted to the incandescent screen just as medievals were attracted to stain glass windows; as McLuhan noted, the light comes through them as opposed to light being shown on them (as with books and photographs and other objects in the physical world). These technologically animated images move and combine in ways unknown only a few decades ago, thus increasing their power to mesmerize.

Ellul observes that the ‘visionary reality of connected images cannot tolerate critical discourse, explanation, duplication, or reflection’ – all rational activities required for separating truth from error. Cognitive pursuits ‘presuppose a certain distance and withdrawal from the action, whereas images require that I continually be involved in the action.’ The images must keep the word in check, keep it humiliated, since ‘the word produces disenchantment with the image; the word strips it of its hypnotic and magical power.’ Words can expose an image as false or misleading, as when we read in a magazine that a television program ‘re-created’ an event that never occurred. Novelist Larry Woiwode further develops the implications:

The mechanics of the English language have been tortured to pieces by TV. Visual, moving images – which are the venue of television – can’t be held in the net of careful language. They want to break out. They really have nothing to do with language. So language, grammar and rhetoric have become fractured.

When the image overwhelms and subjugates the word, the ability to think, write, and communicate in a linear and logical fashion is undermined. Television’s images have their immediate effect on us, but that effect is seldom to cause us to pursue their truth or falsity. Television’s images are usually shorn of their overall context and meaning, and are reduced to

factoids (at best). Ideas located within a historical and logical setting are replaced by impressions, emotions, and stimulations. While images communicate narrative stories and quantitative information well (such as graphs and charts), words are required for more linear and logical communication. Propositions and beliefs can be true or false; images in themselves do not have truth value. The persuasiveness of the image on television led media theorist Tony Schwartz to claim that truth is now an outmoded concept, since it belongs to a time when print communication was dominant.

Media critic Malcolm Muggeridge understood this well:

The one thing television can't do is express ideas.... There is a danger in translating life into an image, and that is what television is doing. In doing it, it is falsifying life. Far from the camera's being an accurate recorder of what is going on, it is the exact opposite. It cannot convey reality nor does it even want to.

The images of television may be arresting, alluring, and entrancing, but, they are prefabricated presentations that shrink events into factoids or create outright falsehoods. This is a feature of the very nature of television, as theologian Francis Schaeffer pointed out:

TV manipulates viewers by its normal way of operating. Many viewers seem to assume that when they have seen something on TV, they have seen it with their own eyes ....

But this is not so, for one must never forget that every television minute has been edited. The viewer does not see the event. He sees... an *edited symbol* or an *edited image* of that event. An aura and illusion of objectivity and truth is built up, which could not be totally the case even if the people shooting the film were completely neutral.

The triumph of the televised image over the word contributes to the depthlessness of postmodern sensibilities. Reality becomes the image, whether or not that image corresponds to any objective state of affairs – and we are not challenged to engage in this analysis. The above-mentioned ABC piece of propaganda advises us to ‘celebrate our cerebral-free non-activity.’ As a consequence of such non-activity, truth suffers, and truthfulness is downplayed if not ignored. Joshua Meyrowitch, a professor of communication, complains that his students ‘tend to have an image-

based standard of truth. If I ask, 'What evidence supports your view or contradicts it?' they look at me as if I came from another planet.' This is because 'It's very foreign to them to think in terms of truth, logic, consistency and evidence. 'Such oblivion exists not only in the case of media students, but is true of culture at large, as cultural critic Kenneth Myers stresses: 'A culture that is rooted more in images than in words will find it increasingly difficult to sustain any broad commitment to any truth, since truth is an abstraction requiring language.' In postmodernism, truth and logic are mere social constructions, which can be deconstructed and reconstructed at whim. Television gives a powerful object lesson in these notions of truth, and so furthers truth decay in the souls of millions for hours every day.

Muggeridge commented that when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf instead of waiting for the Word from Moses, they attempted to televise (or make visible) God. Biblically speaking, God commands that we not make graven images or attempt to televise the invisible. In the beginning was the Word, not the image (John 1:1). God gave us a book, and spoken word from incarnate preachers. When, in any culture, written language is marginalized by television, biblical truth begins to lose its vibrancy. Christians must restore the primacy and power of the Word as an antidote to truth decay by television.

### **The Loss of Self: Truth Removed**

Second, along with the displacing of the word by the flickering television image comes a loss of authentic selfhood, whereby the self is deemed as a moral agent inexorably enmeshed in a moral and spiritual universe. Instead, the self is filled with a welter of images and factoids and sound bites lacking moral and intellectual adhesion. The self becomes ungrounded and fragmented by its experiences of television. This matches the postmodernist abandonment of a unified and normative self that is disciplined and directed by transcendent truths.

By contrast, a love of serious reading orients the self toward grand narratives and abstract truths – such as the holiness and mysteries of God, moral truth, the pursuit of virtue, the dangers of vice, immortality – and these truths place the self in a position of rectitude before them. People whose sensibilities and worldview are adjusted through serious reading tend to live by what they have read. They live in conversation with great minds, even when they are not reading. As Unitarian minister William

Ellery Channing noted, 'It is chiefly through books that we enjoy intercourse with superior minds.' Watchers of television, on the contrary, simply engage in the imitation of proliferating images and multiple personae. Author Barry Sanders sounds this grim theme: 'With the disappearance of the book goes that most precious instrument for holding modern society together, the internalised text on which is inscribed conscience and remorse, and, most significant of all, the self.' Postmodern illiterates live their lives through a series of television characters (better: shadows of characters), and changing channels becomes a model for the self's manner of experience and its mode of being. Moral and spiritual anchorage is lost. The self is left to try on a pastiche of designer personae in no particular order and for no particular reason.

The reading of great literature, on the other hand, immerses us in realities beyond ourselves, although not unrelated to our selves. But this life of reading requires an existential participation not permitted by television, which simply sweeps us along at its own pace. One cannot muse over a television program the way one ponders a character in William Shakespeare or C. S. Lewis, or a Blaise Pascal parable, or a line from a T. S. Eliot poem, such as 'But our lot crawls between dry ribs/to keep its metaphysics warm.' No one on television could utter such a line seriously. It would be 'bad television' – too abstract, too poetic, too deep, just not entertaining. As such, a serious selfhood – in which the self knows itself as a unique actor in a great cosmic drama that is larger than one's self – is rendered impossible. Inwardness and self-reflection are replaced by an outward compulsion for increasingly more mediated experiences that draw one increasingly further away from the essence of one's soul and its ultimate, eternal fulfilment. As fallen beings, we have always been mysterious to ourselves, but television can only exacerbate our sad stupidity. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard perceived that the self is quite easy to lose in the ways of the world:

About such a thing as [the self] not much fuss is made in the world; for a self is the thing the world is least apt to inquire about, and the thing of all things the most dangerous for man to let people notice that he has it. The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed.

Through television, oblivion to self is amplified and broadcast globally and ceaselessly. As a consequence, the self is destabilized, deracinated, and hollowed out; it becomes ungrounded, weightless, truthless, opaque to itself – and it likes it that way, because no alternative is available (on television). Postmodernism prevails; the loss of the self in relation to truth is celebrated, not mourned, for ‘TV is good.’ But, as Jesus intoned, what is it worth if we gain the whole world (televised for all to see) and forfeit our souls (Matthew 16:26)?

### **A ‘Peek-A-Boo World’: Discontinuity and Fragmentation**

Third, television relentlessly displays a pseudo-world of discontinuity and fragmentation. Its images are not only intrinsically inferior to spoken and written discourse in communicating matters of meaning and substance, but the images appear and disappear and reappear without a proper rational context. An attempt at a sobering news story about slavery in the Sudan is followed by a lively advertisement for Disneyland, followed by an appeal to purchase panty hose that will make any woman irresistible, etc., ad nauseum. This is what Postman aptly calls the ‘peek-a-boo world’ – a visual environment lacking coherence, consisting of ever-shifting, artificially linked images. In order to detect a logical contradiction, ‘statements and events [must] be perceived as interrelated aspects of a continuous and coherent context.’ When the context is one of no context, when fragmentation rules, the very idea of contradiction vanishes. Without any historical or logical context, the very notion of intellectual or moral coherence becomes unsustainable on television.

In reflecting on an essay by Walter Benjamin, Jerry Mander discusses the implications of the detachment of image from context with respect to artistic values.

The disconnection from inherent meaning, which would be visible if image, object and context were still merged, leads to a similarly disconnected aesthetics in which all uses for images are equal. All meaning in art and also human acts becomes only what is invested into them. There is no inherent meaning in anything. Everything, even war, is capable of becoming art.

Since postmodernism thrives on fragmentation, incoherence and, ultimately, meaninglessness as modes of being and acting (since there is no God, no objective reality, and no universal rationality to provide unity to anything), this facet of television serves postmodernist ends quite well.

The biblical conception of truth contradicts this surrender to incoherence, since truth is a non-contradictory, unified whole, and because God's universal plan proceeds in a linear (if often mysterious and unpredictable) fashion. The prologue to Luke's Gospel would have made bad television, since Luke claims he 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning,' such that his original reader, Theophilus, might 'know the certainty of the things [he had] been taught' (Luke 1:3-4).

### **Pathologies of Velocity: No Time for Truth**

Fourth, the increasingly rapid pace of television's images makes careful evaluation impossible and undesirable for the viewer, thus rendering determinations of truth and falsity difficult if not impossible. With sophisticated video technologies, scenes change at hypervelocities, and become the visual equivalent of caffeine or amphetamines. The human mind was not designed by its creator to accommodate to these visual speeds, and so the sensorium suffers from the pathologies of velocity. This means that one simply absorbs hundreds and thousands of rapidly changing images, with little notion of what they mean or whether they correspond to any reality outside of themselves. The pace of this assault of images is entirely imposed upon us; it bears little if any resemblance to reality. As Ellul notes, 'The person who puts the images in sequences chooses for you; he condenses or stretches what becomes reality itself for us. We are utterly obliged to follow this rhythm.' This, of course, is the exact opposite of what happens in reading.

Habituation to such imposed velocities tends to make people intellectually impatient and easily bored with anything that is slow moving and undramatic – such as reading books (particularly thoughtful ones), experiencing nature in the raw, and engaging in face-to-face conversations with fellow human beings. Hence, the apprehension of difficult and demanding truths suffers and withers. The pace of television's agenda disallows edification, understanding and reflection. Boredom always threatens and must be defended against at all costs. The overstuffed and overstimulated soul becomes out of sync with God, nature, others, and with itself. It cannot discern truth; it does not want to. This apathetic attitude makes the apprehension and application of truth totally irrelevant.

On the other hand, the godly art of truthfulness requires a sense of pacing one's senses and thoughts according to the subject matter before one. As Augustine said, 'The peace... of the rational soul [is] harmony of

knowledge and action.’ The acquisition of knowledge (warranted belief in what is true), requires intellectual patience and fortitude. One must linger on perplexing notions, work them through, compare them to other ideas, and attempt to reach conclusions that imply wise and rational actions. Before God, one must shut up, listen, and be willing to revolutionize one’s life accordingly (see Eccles. 5:1-7). God’s Word – ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10) – simply cannot be experienced through television, where stillness and silence are only technical mistakes called dead air. Television thus becomes a strategic weapon in the arsenal of postmodernist cynicism and apathy.

### **The Entertainment Imperative: Amusement Triumphant**

Lastly, television promotes truth decay by its incessant entertainment imperative. Amusement trumps all other values and takes captive every topic. Every subject – whether war, religion, business, law, or education – must be presented in a lively, amusing, or stimulating manner. The best way to receive information interpersonally – through the ‘talking head’ – is the worst way according to television values; it simply fails to entertain (unless a comedy routine is in the process). If it fails to entertain, boredom results, and the yawning watcher switches channels to something more captivating. The upshot is that any truth that cannot be transposed into entertainment is discarded by television. Moreover, even off the air, people now think that life (and even Christian ministry) must be entertaining at all costs. One pastor of a megachurch advises preachers that sermons should be roughly twenty minutes in length and must be ‘light and informal,’ with liberal sprinklings of ‘humour and anecdotes.’ Just like television, isn’t it?

The truth is that truth, and the most important truths, are not often entertaining. An entertainment mentality will insulate us from many hard but necessary truths. The concepts of sin, repentance, and hell, for instance, cannot be presented as entertaining without robbing them of their intrinsic meaning. Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles held the interest of their audience not by being amusing but by their zeal for God’s truth, however unpopular or uncomfortable it may have been. They refused to entertain, but instead edified and convicted. It was nothing like television.

### **Becoming Untelevised: The People of Truth**

As Postman, Ellul, and other critics have noted, television is not simply an appliance or a business: It is a way of life and a mentality for approaching reality. As such, it amplifies and reinforces postmodernist themes of truth

decay. Ellul is right: People are 'being plunged into an artificial world which will cause them to lose their sense of reality and to abandon their search for truth.' To thwart television's power, one must refuse its seductions. Television is good at some forms of entertainment but is very bad at helping us develop the habits of being that lead us deeper into truth for God's sake and the sake of our own souls. Mander does not overstate the cause when he claims that 'Television effectively produces a new form of human being – less creative, less able to make subtle distinctions, speedier, and more interested in *things...*' Given this dire condition, some very practical steps can be taken to reverse television's truth-decaying effects on the human being.

Engage in a TV-free fast for at least one week and note the changes produced in your thoughts and attitudes. Discuss these effects with those closest to you and/or record them in a journal. I require students in one of my courses to engage in a media fast of some sort, and most pick television. They almost uniformly report that the fast revealed a level of attachment to the tube they did not expect. They did suffer some withdrawal at first. However, later they experienced a calming effect and a more contemplative attitude to life; they found more time for friends, family, and reading. When they went back to watching television, many were shocked to realize what they had not seen when they were habituated and desensitised to this medium: Most television programming is insipid, illicit, and idiotic.

If either the will or the ability to go cold turkey is lacking, create instead TV-free zones and times. For instance, many watch television when they are emotionally or physically drained. This is the worst time to do so, since television decreases intellectual vigilance and is not truly relaxing. Therefore, one might make the two hours after returning from work a TV-free zone. The same could be done for the two hours before going to bed. Instead of having the television be the focus of the living or family room (with all chairs drawn in its direction), place the television in another, less-frequented room so that one has to go out of the way to watch it. This breaks the television reflex and leaves the way open to better things, truer things.

Replace television watching with truth-enhancing activities, particularly reading thoughtful books. The desire to read and the ability to read well suffer under the ruthless regime of television, as do writing skills. Therefore, truth suffers. The very act of reading demands a deep level of intellectual engagement and bestows tremendous pleasure and benefit for the faithful. We *watch* television; we *read* books. Few have described the truth-conductive nature of print and reading as well as Postman:

Whenever language is the principle medium for communication – especially language controlled by the rigors of print – an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result ....

[Print] is serious because meaning demands to be understood. A written sentence calls upon its author to say something, upon its reader to know the import of what is said. And when an author and reader are struggling with semantic meaning, they are engaged in the most serious challenge to the intellect. This is especially the case with the act of reading, for authors are not always trustworthy. They lie, they become confused, they over-generalize, they abuse logic, and, sometimes, common sense. The reader must come armed, in a serious state of intellectual readiness.

The mental act of reading is not passive, but active; it engages the mind and the imagination in wondrous ways not possible through television – in ways that are, in fact, discouraged by television. Through reading, truth becomes possible and knowable. The discipline of wresting meaning from texts and assessing their truths is invaluable for people who aspire to ‘speak the truth in love’ (Ephesians 4:15). Truth is restored by attending to the Good Book – whose authors are trustworthy, but not always easy to understand (2 Peter 3:16) – and to good books, which require the kind of cognitive criticism Postman describes (Philippians 4:8).

The author of Hebrews chastised his or her readers because of their slowness and laziness in learning important biblical truths, which resulted in spiritual ignorance and immaturity. In our truth-decayed day, when television hinders the acquisition, internalisation, and application of so much truth, we should transpose this ancient warning to apply to ourselves.

We have too much to say about this [Jesus’ priesthood], but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Neutralizing the acids of truth decay means refusing the enticements of one of its chief post modern agents – television.

*Douglas S. Groothuis (Ph.D., University of Oregon) is associate professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary. This article is adapted from his book,*

Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism *InterVarsity Press, 2000*