

Thesis: television
poses severe health
risks and has become
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In my previous essay, I concluded that television is an unavoidable phenomenon in this technologically advanced world of ours and that we are just going to have to accept that. However, after additional research on this topic, I came across several issues vis-a-vis television use and hence, I am now writing a research paper on how television use has alarming effects on how we think and has a plethora of health risks.

We all heard the warning when we were kids... “ Switch off that idiot box; It’ll make you lazy”. It seems that our parents were right after all. I previously discussed how binge-watching affects our mental health. Although ordering takeout, sitting on the couch with your comforter and binge-watching an entire show might seem alluring, excessive binge-watching is a sign of depression. Furthermore, “ Research on people at higher risk for developing diabetes found that for each hour spent watching TV per day, the risk of developing the disease increased 3. 4 percent” (1, Huffington Post). And this is not just because of our idleness while watching TV, it is also because of the commercials of high-calorie foods that are targeted towards us. “ 95% of advertising materials displayed in US schools promote fast food, sweets, and sweet drinks despite the negative opinions of numerous consumer organizations and American pediatric associations”. (2, National Institutes of Health). This is particularly harmful for children because excessive television use has been linked to childhood obesity in a study done by the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. “ The researchers found a significant association between the number of hours of television watched per day and body fat mass, with every extra hour/day spent watching television associated with a 2. 2-pound increase in body fat” (3, Psychology Today).

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Other than the physical health risks, there are several mental health risks too. Loneliness leads to depression and anxiety. This not only affects our social skills, but it can also damage our relationships. “ The more you believe in popular portrayals of romance on television, the less committed you may be to your real relationship, according to research published several years ago in the journal *Mass Communication and Society*” (1, Huffington Post). It can also lead to reproductive problems in men. In a study conducted by Harvard, lower sperm count was found in men who binge-watched TV. “ Results showed that men who watched more than 20 hours of TV weekly had a 44% lower sperm count than those who watched almost no TV” (4, Harvard School of Public Health). These are some alarming figures that the people need to know.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these health risks. According to a study conducted by the University of Otago, children were susceptible to anti-social behavior if they watched a lot of television. “ Professor Bob Hancox of the University’s Department of Preventive and Social Medicine says he and colleagues found that the risk of having a criminal conviction by early adulthood increased by about 30% with every hour that children spent watching TV on an average weeknight” (5, University of Otago). However, I think it is important to point out that this study (and some more studies on the same) have been debated by scientists because the studies fail to adhere to the basic scientific principle that ‘ Correlation does not equal causation’. “ The correlation between nearly all the negative behavior and time spent watching TV vanished after the researchers statistically accounted for relatedness. Genetics, they concluded, shapes brain and

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behavior, which in turn has wide-ranging consequences, including how many hours of TV individual children tend to watch and how their brains respond to it. “ For example,” Schwartz says, “ children with increased predisposition toward aggressive behavior may be more drawn to TV.” (6, *The Scientific American*)

Thus, the following were physical and mental health risks associated with prolonged TV use. Now I will explore how television affects the way we think and how it can be used to manipulate us.

Television revolutionized society when it became mainstream in the ‘ 60s and the ‘ 70s. In a lot of countries, special-interest groups and governments used television to influence public opinion. This is true in the US too, where Roger Ailes, a campaign manager encouraged his candidate to use ‘ short, snappy lines’ to win public support. That candidate went on to become the President of the United States. “ Television of the 1970’s went hand in hand with the social politics of the day. In order to maintain solid ratings and garner public interest, networks and television producers had to alter their programming to meet the needs of shifting public discourse” (7, *Dreaming America* dissertation). TV has been used to distract the public several times in the past. The basic connection between TV and thought manipulation is defined in two communications theories- The Agenda Setting theory and the Cultivation Theory. “ Agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and

subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues" (8, University of Twente). The relevance to this theory in real-life is summed up properly by Bernard Cohe, a politician from Virginia back in 1967. " The press may not be very successful at telling people what to think, but it is stunningly beautiful in telling its readers what to think about".

The cultivation theory is loosely related to the agenda-setting theory. " Cultivation theory in its most basic form, suggests that television is responsible for shaping, or ' cultivating' viewers' conceptions of social reality. The combined effect of massive television exposure by viewers over time subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals and, ultimately, for our culture as a whole (9, University of Twente)." Currently, in the US, 6 companies control 90% of the media (10, Business Insider). NPR has a different claim and so the number of companies might be around 10, but this is still shocking number (20, NPR).

" I guess if you're in the media business, you'd like to make a difference to the world by sometimes putting forward your own opinion" (Rupert Murdoch). Rupert Murdoch is a media mogul and he is the chairman and CEO of a lot of news media. His news channel is infamous for misrepresenting facts, doing ' shows' instead of journalism and presenting the news in a very biased manner that patronizes its viewers. In fact, according to an NPR article, Rupert Murdoch's organization made a million dollars' contribution to the party they favor in 2010 (way higher than all other outlets put together). One can also look at the contributions of various media outlets to various political parties and see clear correlations between

where their donations go, and which party they prefer (11, NPR). In this way, excessive television usage may result in 'unconscious confirmation biases' or personal belief in opinions that are not quite 'our own'. When you put these facts into perspective, a scary image presents itself.

However, this reality is not new for African-American people in America. The 'War on Drugs' and 'Law and Order' policies were particularly detrimental to the African American and Latin American communities. These policies were followed by PSAs (Public Service Announcements) that invaded television and portrayed people from these communities as 'criminals' and sometimes even as 'terrifying human-snakes' (link attached in citations) to incite public fear for those communities. "It's essential to hold the press accountable for its role in stirring up hysteria about black 'junkies'" (12, Huffington Post). This is a prime example of how television can be used to manipulate the audience's beliefs and to serve as a medium to generate profit for certain organizations including, at times, politicians.

Recently there have been a lot of complaints from the American people concerning the authenticity of the media. Certain media outlets appear to pander to certain swathes of people. Although conspiracy theorists might feel like this alone is 'concrete evidence' for their theories, there is another, more pragmatic explanation for this cause. Media outlets publish news and change its tones according to the opinions of their own base to make more profit. "According to McManus's theory (1992), news has become a double commodity that news providers need to gather attention (audience rating and viewership) from the news consumers. Further, news providers provide

the information to the news consumers and gain revenue from the advertisers??” (13, Foxification thesis). Thus, these political leanings, more often than not, are because the media wants to make money, and not for more ‘sinister’ reasons. “What comes across the small screen amounts to an entertaining version of the world-to Ideology, in a word-but whatever conspiracy Theorists may think, this is not because The networks are trying to indoctrinate The helpless masses. No, the networks generate Ideology mostly indirectly and unintentionally, by trying to read popular sentiment and Tailoring their schedules toward what they think The cardboard people they’ve conjured up want to see and hear” (14, Inside Prime Time, Gitlin 203).

Thus, we have established that television can be used as a medium by organizations to achieve their motives. And this isn’t just limited to social justice. As I quoted above, 95% of advertisements in the US are food-related. A lot of times, children wish to purchase these food items or other items like toys and cellphones only because they watch advertisements on TV. In fact, corporations use ‘target marketing’ a lot to boost their sales through TV and other media as much as possible. “Target Marketing involves breaking a market into segments and then concentrating your marketing efforts on one or a few key segments consisting of the customers whose needs and desires most closely match your product or service offerings” (15, The Balance). Furthermore, a lot of advertisements feature corporations trying to be funny or even altruistic. This is because, the way we feel about a particular brand goes a long way when we are making a decision of buying into the brand or not. “Advertising research reveals that the consumer’s emotional response

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to an ad has far greater influence on their reported intent to buy a product than does the ad's content — by a factor of 3-to-1 for television commercials and 2-to-1 for print ads (16, Psychology Today).

Other than different agencies' attempts to lead you to do or think something, TV can affect our psychological thoughts without those agencies even trying. In a study conducted by a professor at the University at Sussex, researchers found that people who are exposed to more 'negative' news tend to be more anxious and sad (17, Psychology Today). Furthermore, according to a study led by Bryan Gibson, a psychologist at Central Michigan University, watching shows (especially reality shows) inundated with bullying, exclusion and manipulation can make people more aggressive in their everyday lives too (18, NPR). It's even worse for children. "Theory of mind (often abbreviated "ToM") is the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.—to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one's own. Deficits of theory of mind often occur in people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), schizophrenia, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)" (19, Psychology Today). Thus the 'theory of mind' is essential in cultivating a 'sense of people and the world' in children. And this phenomenon is severely hampered by TV and the unreal world they are shown through it.

All this reasoning leads us to one understanding. A TV might lead us to buy certain items that we don't want, believe some things that might not be true, buy services we don't really need and eat food that we shouldn't be eating.

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Hence, I conclude by quoting my thesis (because I believe I have provided enough evidence for the same)-Television has become a commodity to further consumerism and it has severe health risks. And thus to be truly 'free' in an intellectual sense, we should limit our television usage wherever possible.