

"thinking outside the  
idiot box" vs.

"watching tv makes  
you smarter" essay



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There is no doubt that television holds a purpose in our society today, but is that purpose brain-numbing or actually beneficial to our brain development? The television, also known as: TV, the boob tube, the idiot box, as well as many other nicknames, has been around for almost a hundred years. Ever since cable TV became popular in the 1950's, there has always been a worry that people watch too much TV. Most people believe that with exorbitant exposure to the popular media both dumbs us down as well as makes us more likely to tolerate acts of violence.

Dana Stevens' "Thinking Outside the Idiot Box" argues that television does not make you smarter, directly contrasting Steven Johnson's article, "Watching TV Makes You Smarter." Television has definitely made a mark on our hearts and has most certainly made an impact on society, but too much of a good thing is never a good thing. The propaganda photo about television that was found on Facebook is a good lens that helps me understand Stevens' argument better.

The photo assisted the understanding of Stevens' depiction and contradiction of Johnson's writing, her discussion about what these "more complex shows" are actually like, as well as her discussion about the national event TV Turn Off Week. This photo clearly depicts that TV does not enhance or benefit in brain production in any way, however it "destroys" the imagination, or what's left of it, and in return, it fills the mind with complete nonsense, and therefore numbing the brain.

The photo, which is a picture of a television, states, "My job is to help destroy what's left of your imagination by feeding you endless doses of

sugar-coated mindless garbage. " As humans, we are very complex intellectual beings, however television has been captivating our minds and bringing our intelligence down. Although Johnson makes some interesting points about how TV can make you smarter, Steven's view on the subject is more realistic and correlates more with the piece of pop culture.

While Johnson's thesis is true that television shows have become more complex over the past couple of decades, that has no correlation with his argument that the audiences of these programs are becoming smarter by watching them. Stevens says, " Johnson's claim for television as a tool for brain enhancement seems deeply, hilariously bogus" (297). She believes that watching television today does not make the viewer smarter but that it essentially just turns their brains into vegetables.

Looking at the picture after reading this, I had a more clear understanding of this part of her argument. Also on the contrary to Johnson's article, Stevens discusses the examples of television shows that Johnson mentions that he is convinced enhances brain function by making the viewers pay attention, make inferences, and track shifting relationships between characters. Some of these shows are *The Sopranos*, *24*, *Hill Street Blues*, and others.

The show *The Sopranos*, is a prime example because this show will " connect multiple threads at the same time, layering one plot atop another" (Johnson, 283). Therefore, *The Sopranos* require a lot more attention from their audience engaging them with complex characterization and intertwining multiple episodes, which is what Johnson calls the " Sleeper Curve. " But does engaging in television shows such as this benefit the brain in anyway?

Stevens says no; she believes in watching shows like these, " watching TV teaches you to watch more TV" (Stevens, 296).

Stevens discusses that Johnson fails to acknowledge the controversies about shows like 24, which has negative representation of Muslim terrorists and has implicit endorsement of torture, and basically only concentrating on how the shows formal structure teaches the viewers to pay attention, make inferences, and track relationships between character. Stevens' continues to go on about the show 24 and says, " 24 is the perfect example of a TV show that challenges its audience's cognitive faculties with intricate plotlines and rapid-fire information while actively discouraging them from thinking too much about the vigilante ethic it portrays.

It's really good at teaching you to think... about future episodes of 24" (296). Thus, going back to what she said earlier about television only teaching us to watch more television. This is a good example of the " sugar-coated mindless garbage" that the picture is portraying. While the show is constantly making the viewer ponder about what is going to happen next, the negative representation of Muslims and the endorsement of torture is just complete nonsense. Also contrasting Johnsons argument, Stevens discusses TV Turnoff Week.

TV Turnoff Week is an annual event that is nation wide where children, families, schools and communities are encouraged to turn off screens and " turn on life. " Instead of relying on television programming for entertainment, participators read books, explore and enjoy nature, and spent time with family and friends. Over 300 million people participate every year.

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Stevens says that grown men and women should know to their own dosages of TV just like knowing how many drinks they can handle at the bar. Stevens claims, " There couldn't be a better time to test Steven Johnson's theory than National TV Turnoff Week.

" She hypothesizes that seven whole days without television would not make the participants any dumber. The participants would actually get smarter. Instead of every bit of their imagination being destroyed by television, as the picture states, their imagination is being enhanced by reading books and exploring the outdoors. Therefore, the brains of these participants are being benefitted and their imaginations are broadening. In conclusion, the photograph that was chosen is a clear lens that helped me understand Steven's writing.

Steven's article " Thinking Outside the Idiot Box" is strictly contradicting Johnsons article " Watching TV Makes You Smarter. " The picture goes along with Steven's thesis that television in fact, does not make you smarter, but actually does the opposite. While television has become a big part of our lives, however, that does not necessarily means that it is a good thing. Stevens' argument is not the fact that television destroys what is left in peoples' imaginations, it is inferred that she can agree that television does fill the mind with " sugar-coated mindless garbage.

" Steven proves this by contrasting every thing that Johnson had said in his article by depicting and falsifying his thesis that television makes you smarter. The " more complex" television shows that Johnson discusses are actually not as beneficial to the brain as he claims they are. She also talks

about TV Turn Off Week, and that it is beneficial to the participants, not negative. The photo has helped me understand that TV is called the "idiot box" for a reason.