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Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec., 1957), pp. 59-70

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41317904>

Accessed: 23/01/2014 23:05

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By William A. Belson\*

## *The Effects Of Television<sup>1</sup>*

With television now operating in Australia, questions are naturally being asked about the social and other effects which it is likely to have. In the circumstances, I thought you would like to know about some of its effects here in Britain.

British television broadcasting began in 1936 from the Alexandra Palace transmitter in London. In those days, viewers were very few indeed and in 1939 the service closed down until after the war. Transmission began again in 1946, but it was not until 1950 that the television population reached the 4% level. From then on, however, the growth was rapid, and the position now, late in 1957, is that over 55% of the homes in the United Kingdom have television sets. About half of these can receive commercial broadcasts as well, and that proportion is rapidly growing. In the early days, viewers were drawn disproportionately from those in upper income groups, but by now it has come in almost equal proportion to all but the aged and the very poor. There are now 22 transmitters in the country and between them they cover a reception area in which over 95% of the United Kingdom population lives.

Nor is this a coverage in name only, for the average viewer watches evening broadcasts for about 40% of the available viewing time and some hundreds of thousands view for more than 60% of that time.

### **Theories About What Television Does to Society.**

The growth of television in America and in Canada has been more spectacular, but what happened in Britain was quite sufficient to produce a considerable amount of speculation in all quarters of society. Television was said to be doing many different things. Thus there was a feeling amongst a lot of people that television had reduced attendances at sporting events; that it had lowered the

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<sup>1</sup> Based on sections of a forthcoming book, "The Impact of British Television". The writer is Senior Psychologist in the Audience Research Department of the BBC, London.

number of viewers going to meetings of clubs and of trade unions. Some felt it had something to do with neglected gardens and household disrepair, but perhaps the most frequent claim was that television had caused a major reduction in attendance at the cinema and at the live theatre. Others again felt it was cutting down on viewers' initiative and dulling imaginative processes; that it was limiting interests and rendering them passive; that it was making people lazy. It was also felt to be keeping people up late at night and to be causing eye-strain. And of course, the view was frequently put that it was reducing reading and getting in the way of homework and of other studies. *On the other hand*, there were claims that television was bringing the family together again in the home, and generally increasing family cohesiveness; that it kept potential delinquents off the street; that it kept the children quiet, cut down on boredom, reduced irritability, and generally made home a nicer place to be in. It was held that, in providing a common talking point, television was helping to bridge social gaps between people. Frequently, it was said to be introducing viewers to things they'd never have known about otherwise, to be educational, and to be generally broadening viewers' cultural horizons.

Interestingly, there is a large proportion of ordinary viewers who take the position that television's main impact upon them is to give them relaxation and pleasure. And while they are willing to agree with some of the adverse claims and to generate adverse claims themselves, they tend not to place great importance upon these points, feeling that the pleasure they get from television more than makes up for any loss they sustain. This feeling does not in any way affect the accuracy or otherwise of existing claims about television's social impact; nor would I regard it as rendering those claims (adverse or otherwise) in any way unimportant. But it is, I think, well to keep this feeling of the viewers in mind as a background to any research into television's social effects.

What lies behind some of the theories (about television's effects) is not always easy to say. People theorize for different reasons. Some, you can be fairly sure, have been using television as a scapegoat for the ills of business and of society. Other of the claims probably spring out of unfounded optimism and hopefulness. Some will be based on fragmentary experience, and some will be the result of systematic observation. Whatever the case, many of the claims seem to be of sufficient importance, both socially and economically, to make it important for us to know just where the truth lies.

**American Findings.**

Until recently, there was in Britain very little research indeed, and rumour held sway. In America, however, the position has for some time been quite different and a lot of results have been published.<sup>2</sup> Thus there have been at least six reported studies on the effects of television on cinema going, all of them concluding that the effect has been a substantial reduction in attendance. Four investigators have reported a reduction in book-reading and six a fall in the amount of magazine reading done. Two inquiries have reported a reduction in the amount of time spent on hobbies, two a fall in attendance at sporting events, and one that television has cut down on attendance at church, at organisation meetings, and at parties. Other investigators have between them concluded that television has reduced conversation with other members of the family, the taking of drives, the total amount of time spent by children with other children. And there have been seven separate reports of substantial reduction in radio listening.

American investigators have also reported that television does not tend to change the time of evening meals, and that it has increased both the number of visitors received by viewers, and the amount of time spent by children with parents. One inquiry reported an increase in viewers' *interest* in sport (though not in *attendance* at sporting events). The one point over which the Americans have disagreed has been about newspaper reading: two investigators reported no change in newspaper reading, one a reduction, and one a gain.

Ordinarily, these findings might have resolved some of the uncertainty about the impact of British television. To some extent they have. Unfortunately, however, the great bulk of the American research has been based on comparison of the present activities of viewers and non-viewers, and it has tended to ignore the possibility that these two sets of people may have been different to start with. True, differences in terms of age, sex, and social class have in most cases been controlled. But this is no guarantee at all against the continued presence of appreciable and highly relevant original differences. Even the little that is known of these original differences argues strongly against simple matching by age, sex and social class. Thus within the one social class the persons electing to

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<sup>2</sup> "Television Research: An Annotated Bibliography", R. Meyersohn, Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1953.

secure sets have been found to be those who were, at the outset, more materialist in outlook than those not so electing. In other words, their pleasures were vested more in material possessions and in external things than they were in the more intellectual and 'self-contained' things. Again, the *non-viewer* tended the more (originally) to play sport, to go to hear music played, to be a member of a lending library, and go to see ballet, to go in for birthday celebrations, to make up his own mind in choosing a career. The *viewer*, on the other hand, tended more (than the non-viewer) to have an outdoor garden, to own a labour-saving gadget, to have bought a home, to have employed others. Other differences of this kind, cutting right across social class, are known, and it is certainly reasonable to suspect that there may be more.

This is not to say that the American results are wrong. The position is that you simply can't tell. An unambiguous result requires the elimination of original differences and this can be achieved only through matching in terms of those characteristics which have been found empirically to be associated with (or predictive of) whatever it is that is being studied. *And the matching criteria required for the study of one thing (e.g. gardening) are quite likely to be different from those required for the study of another (e.g. cinema going).*

### The Effects of British Television.

It was against this background that work in Britain had to be carried out. I shall be reporting mainly upon a four-year study of the effects of television upon a wide range of the interests of adult viewers.<sup>3</sup> Other studies have in fact been carried out, some of them on the effect of specific series of broadcasts, but on this occasion I shall be doing little more than naming them.<sup>4</sup>

All of them, however, have been based upon what I have been calling the "Stable Correlate" method.<sup>5</sup> This is a development of matching procedure of the kind I suggested above. The matching criteria are developed empirically as characteristics fairly highly associated with or predictive of the thing being studied (e.g. the

<sup>3</sup> W. A. Belson, "The Effects of Television Upon the Interests and the Initiative of Adult Viewers", Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Sheffield, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> See footnotes 10, 11 and 12.

<sup>5</sup> The method is described in detail in "A Technique for Studying the Effect of a Television Broadcast", W. A. Belson, *Journal of Applied Statistics*, Volume V, No. 3, 1956.

amount of cinema-going). Three or four of these criteria are used, these being the ones which, as a combination, give the greatest matching power. There is no discarding of unmatched cases, the matching being achieved through a regression equation or through simple weighting. The selected matching criteria must not of course be themselves open to influence by television (e.g., type of family, occupational background, and pre-TV ownership of various durable goods, are 'stable' in this sense.) A device is built into the design to allow a check to be made on the degree to which the isolation of effects has been complete.<sup>6</sup>

**Television's Effects on Interests.** TV's effects on interests were studied through a representative cross-section of the interests of the people in Greater London, these interests to be used as a frame of reference or grid against which to measure change. The study itself was made through survey methods, using a sample of 800 adults in Greater London. The reason for using a *sample of interests* was to ensure that a reliable generalization could be made about TV's effect on interests *as a whole* (in London). There were in fact fifty separate interests in the grid or frame of reference, and some of these were as follows: interior decoration of the home, reading books, going to the cinema, visiting people, international and world affairs, politics in Great Britain, going to see sporting events, fashions today, looking at paintings, ice or roller skating, collecting things. Television's effects were measured in terms not only of activity associated with interests, but in terms also of the intensity or strength of the viewer's *feeling* of interest in different things.<sup>7</sup>

*The main finding* was that while some interests suffered loss and others underwent a gain, television's effect on interests, taken as a whole, has been to reduce them. Thus the total amount of activity associated with viewers' interests has been reduced by about 10%. In terms of intensity of *feeling of interest*, the average reduction was 5%. The interests studied do not, of course, include viewing itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Enquiries of this kind have of course been based on the long-term study of changes in temporary panels of viewers, checks being made on them before they get sets and from time to time afterwards. The method requires that there be a control group of non-viewers (matched to the viewers) on whom parallel checks can be made in order to arrive at an estimate of the effect of things other than television. The method has a lot to recommend it and is sometimes the only one which can be used. Its main practical difficulties lie in its administration and in the 'time factor'.

<sup>7</sup> Full details of the methods used are given in "Measuring the Effects of Television: A Description of Method", W. A. Belson, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 21, Summer, 1957.



The permanency of these changes seems to be specially important. The research design used does in fact allow the measurement of change after one year of set ownership, two years, three years, and so on. I'd like to take first, activity associated with viewer's interests, and to refer to this as 'activity level'. The loss in the first year of ownership is about 14%, and this degree of loss is maintained during the second year. Thereafter, however, there occurs a steady tendency towards recovery, such that the loss in activity level after 3-4 years stands at 10%, and at 2% after 5-6 years of set ownership. With 'strength of interest' (i.e. a feeling of interest irrespective of whether or not it be accompanied by activity), the position is somewhat different. In the first year, there is no significant change. During the second, however, there is a fall by 9%. After that comes a tendency towards recovery: the loss is 6% after about three years and 3% after approximately five years.

*What this means is that while TV reduces interests fairly substantially in the early years of set ownership, the loss is not permanent.* As far as interests are concerned, the viewer can (given time) take television in his stride. The picture is one of long-term resilience.<sup>8</sup>

(A) The effect when the interests are featured in the programmes themselves. Theoretically at least, it is important to distinguish between two sets of interests: those which tend to be featured in television programmes and those which do not. It would not be surprising if the latter underwent some form of decline, at least of a temporary kind. But what of the other group?

This part of the check was based upon a special sample—namely one of those interests which had from time to time been featured in television broadcasts. Some of these were already included in the 50-item general sample, but others were added as part of the special sample (i.e. of TV-featured interests). The results of this part of the inquiry showed, however, that even these interests had been reduced (that is, taking them all together). The reduction was less, it is true, than with interests in general; and recovery was complete after about five years. But the pattern of loss is strikingly similar to that with the general sample.

There are two ways of looking at this. One is that merely to treat a topic on television is to reduce the viewer's interest in it!

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<sup>8</sup> If there is any exception to this, it appears to be in terms of the number of interests which the viewer previously pursued at a really intense level, though this is made up for by a long-term increase in the total number of his interests.

While in isolated cases this may be so (depending on the manner of presentation and the topic), there is a second 'explanation' which makes more sense and which fits in more with the facts. It is simply that for every half-hour during which an interest is being treated in a television broadcast, there is a very large span of time when it is not, and when presumably, it fares much as do the interests which are not featured at all. On this interpretation, any attempt to stimulate an interest by featuring it in television programmes, starts out with a handicap which is inherent in the medium itself. This is not to say that it cannot be done—it frequently is—but it does call for something rather special either in subject matter or in treatment. This handicap would, however, become appreciably less with passing time.

(B) **Some specific areas of interest.** I want now to report on some of the single areas of interest which were included within the two samples. Television's effects on some of these are, I think, of importance in themselves. But a study of them will serve also to bring out, or at least to hint at, the particular way in which television influences our interests. Such a study does in fact, make it very clear, indeed that television's impact has been anything but uniform. Different interests are affected differently. And it becomes clear too that this variability of effect is a function of much more than whether or not the interest has been featured in television programmes.

Leaving interpretation and analysis aside for the moment, however, here are some details of what happened to various of the interests studied. Contrary to much of the speculation, television has *increased* viewers' attendances at sporting events. For all sports, taken together, the increase in attendance is about 10%, though from the long-term point of view, the increase is not sustained at that level. More particularly, television has increased, by about 18% attendance at major soccer matches; and the intensity of viewers' *felt* interest in going to see such matches has been increased by about the same amount. Attendance at show jumping has gone up even more. And there have also been substantial increases in attendance at Wimbledon tennis, ice or roller skating, and motor racing.

Attendance at variety and vaudeville shows has also been boosted by television—presumably through viewers wanting to see more of the variety stars they meet in TV programmes. For the cinema and for attendance at plays, the position is very different,



however. With each of these, there has been a major decline both in attendance and in *desire* to attend.

Cinema-going in London has been affected very much indeed. Having a TV set has meant that the viewer's attendance at the cinema has fallen by about 33%, and that the extent even of desire to go has been reduced by about 20%. The decrements year by year are specially interesting. In the first year of television ownership, attendance falls off by about 12%. In the next, it goes on down to more than 40%, and stays at about that level between the second and the fourth years of ownership. By the fifth year there appears to have been a partial recovery, but even so viewers are, at that stage, going 30% less than they'd have gone in the absence of television. The reduction in *desire* to attend reaches a maximum loss of 26% between the second and the fourth year of ownership, and such recovery as occurs after that is of a very minor kind indeed.

From this it will be clear that cinema-going has been affected to a far greater extent than have other interests, and, perhaps more important, it lacks their resilience. Much can be said about the implications of this evidence, but one thing is specially worth saying. Since television's impact on cinema going seems to wane after about three years, the question here—and perhaps elsewhere—isn't one of whether or not television will 'kill the cinema'. Rather it seems to be one of establishing the new level of operation to which the cinema industry is likely to gravitate in the absence of effective new techniques or developments.

Another area of loss is *reading*. There is an appreciable reduction in book reading, and even in the desire to read books. And there is less reading (by about 15%) on topics of the following kind: events in different parts of the world, modern developments in science, international and world affairs, the ways and the activities of people in other countries. The reduction of reading about these topics seems to be the result of making the information more readily available through television programmes. Whether it is better or worse to get it this way is a matter largely for individual judgment. But it is worth suggesting in passing that this particular change may well be the price of getting such information to a vast number of people who would not have got it through reading in any case, and probably not at all.

While there was a small reduction in viewers' interest in politics in Great Britain, and an accompanying larger reduction (13%) in reading about political events, the evidence does anything but suggest that television has reduced participation in trade union activities. Nor, at the non-political level, has it been responsible for such fall-off as has occurred in attendance at the various meetings of associations or clubs.

A small sample of what might be called 'home oriented' interests was also studied (e.g. interior decoration of the home, different ways of preparing food, labour-saving gadgets and ideas, festive occasions, chinaware and pottery, collecting things). Television's effect on these varied quite a lot, but taking them all together, associated activity level fell by about 11% in the first year. Thereafter, however, it moved back towards the pre-television level, so that after five years there was, if anything, a slight gain. With 'socially oriented' interests (e.g. making new friends, visiting people, welfare work, playing cards), the picture was very much the same: a loss of 15% (in activity level) in the first year and a steady movement after that towards full recovery after about five years.

Whereas television has tended to reduce the more artistic and intellectual interests (e.g. ballet, sculpture, visiting public gardens, going to see plays, going to see the 'great homes' of Britain), there is at least one striking exception. This is 'going to see paintings'. Attendance at exhibitions of paintings went up by at least 30%—a finding which fits in very well with the spectacle of over-crowded galleries following various of the television presentations (from London art galleries) by Sir Gerald Kelly.<sup>9</sup> The odd thing, however, was that in spite of increased attendances, there was a reduced *desire* to attend on the part of the *broad general public*. This seeming paradox would of course be consistent with a finding that these television broadcasts had stimulated action in that small group predisposed to attend, but had satisfied the idle curiosity of the many who would not have attended in any case. The same sort of thing occurred with 'going to see the English countryside', and in several other cases. The implications of this are fascinating, and may well be of extreme importance. For if 'idle curiosity' is a thread whereby an interest may be captured and enlarged, and if television snaps that thread, what then?

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<sup>9</sup> Transmissions from the Royal Academy of Arts and from other galleries during 1954 and 1955.

(C) **The character of television's impact on interests.** Scanning the results for the 65 interests studied, it is possible to detect several broad patterns.

In the first place, the reduction tends to be less when the interests are dealt with in the television programmes themselves. This, however, is by no means the only factor determining the amount of change produced by television. Thus with interests which are so featured, there is a greater tendency towards loss with (i) the more artistic things (e.g. ballet, sculpture, architecture of churches and cathedrals), (ii) and with interests involving reading (e.g. information related to the topics featured in the programme). On the other hand, either the loss is small, or there is a gain with (i) sporting events, (ii) attendance at variety or vaudeville shows and (iii) those interests where a striking or a well-known personality is involved in the programmes themselves, or takes part in the presentation.

Where the interest tends *not* to be featured in TV programmes, the loss is *greater* with some things than it is with others. Thus it is greater with things such as (i) book reading, (ii) interests involving solace, outlet, and relaxation (e.g. talking about the past, strolling in the park, cross-word puzzles), (iii) some non-participation (or spectator) interests *excluding* sports (e.g. cinema going, attendance at plays, going to hear military bands or light music, going to hear talks). But the reducing impact of television is smaller (or there may even be a gain) with certain others: (i) home-oriented interests; (ii) interests involving other people (e.g. playing darts, club-membership, welfare work, making new friends); (iii) interests involving the use of the hands (e.g. playing cards, rifle shooting, needlework, photography).

It is of course fairly obvious that if people spend a lot of time watching television, other things are likely to be displaced. But quite apart from this, it seems possible on the evidence to begin to understand how it is that certain interests are reduced while others are not. Anything of this sort must, frankly, be classed as speculation. But nonetheless the pattern of the changes is strongly suggestive. Thus it appears that with some interests, television can act as a fairly direct *substitute*. The prime example of this is cinema going, though it could well be that interests involving solace and 'outlet' fall also into this group (e.g., strolling in the park, 'gossiping', talking about the past). For other interests, the television

presentation may be providing an effective *substitute for the real thing* (as with the presentation of information which might otherwise have to be obtained through reading; and as also with broadcasts about English towns, about the architecture of churches and cathedrals, and on orchestral concerts). Next, it appears that for some minority interests—the more erudite and aesthetic ones—seeing the television presentation may in fact be convincing the majority that there is not much in this after all (e.g. ballet, heraldry, folk lore, the ‘great homes’ of England). On the other hand, there appear to be some interests which have that sort of wide and natural appeal which, if they are brought before people at all, make them want more and produce a desire for ‘the real thing’. Examples of such things seem to be soccer, variety performances, Wimbledon tennis, interior decoration of the home.

This is not to suggest that the situation is a static or an entirely predetermined one, for there is abundant evidence, both from this enquiry and from others, that the mode of presentation can make a great deal of difference, and that gains can be achieved in spite of the topic being difficult and in spite of the inherent handicap of the medium itself.

#### Seeing Television's Impact in Perspective.

Other studies of television's impact have been completed or are in progress. Thus assessments have been made of its effects on viewers' initiative and on their imaginative processes.<sup>3</sup> Various studies have also been made of its power to communicate and to change attitudes—studies which point up some of the less expected difficulties and advantages of the medium.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup> A major study, concerning television's impact on family life and on social behaviour is nearing completion.<sup>13</sup> And a new series of checks has been started, this time about television's effects upon viewers' ambition level, their knowledge, and their patterns of expenditure (including a check on the commercial effects of Television advertising).

Information of this kind should help not only in resolving some of the speculation which goes on, but also in preparing the way for

<sup>10</sup> “Learning and Attitude Changes Resulting From Viewing A Television Series: ‘Bon Voyage’, W. A. Belson, British Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 26, Part I, 1956.

<sup>11</sup> “The Effects of a Television Series: ‘We The British: Are We in Decline’”, An Audience Research Report, BBC, 1956.

<sup>12</sup> “The Effects of a Television Series ‘The Hurt Mind’”, An Audience Research Report, BBC, 1957.

<sup>13</sup> A BBC enquiry.

a more rounded evaluation of the medium than has previously been available. But it would be wrong to conclude this account without trying to bring into proper perspective these studies and the information they yield.

The first point that must be made is that when it is said that television has affected interests in one or another way, the reference is to interests *other than interest in viewing itself*. The picture is one of a *change* in the focus of interest. And there is a sense in which you could regard what has happened as a transfer. The second point may be the more important. I said earlier that when viewers were asked about television's impact on them, a great many of them tended to concentrate upon the statement that *television gives them a lot of pleasure*. And, were it needed, there is massive evidence in Audience Research findings that this is no mere lip-service to the medium. I think it is most difficult, and sometimes impossible, to weigh one kind of impact in relation to another: but if our aim is to develop a balanced evaluation of the medium, I think it would be a mistake to become so concerned with television's more sociological impact—important as I think it is—as to forget the viewer's insistence on the fact that television gives him a lot of pleasure.