

Title:

The Awful Truth About Television: Fake News and other reasons not to watch TV news

Word Count:

998

Summary:

Think your TV news show is packed with informative, unbiased news? It may actually be contaminated with propaganda produced by government agencies, large corporations, and others and disguised as news. Unfortunately, that's not the only problem with TV news. Part 11 of "The Awful Truth About Television" series.

Keywords:

TV, television, VNR, fake, news, government, corporate, propaganda

Article Body:

DO touch that dial to avoid fake news

Government agencies, corporations, industry groups, and other large organizations contaminate the airwaves with fake news. These organizations produce pre-packaged news segments called VNRs, or Video News Releases. These segments look like real news. In fact, VNRs are little more than propaganda pieces for their producers. Stations have routinely used these fake news segments since at least the 1980s, usually without disclosing their source.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the government and other social actors creating interesting audio or video pieces to communicate with the public. The problem is that these propaganda pieces do not properly identify the source. They are made to look and feel like independent news casts with government/corporate actors pretending to be reporters.

Government attempts to regulate fake news

There have been a few efforts to control this phenomenon. The Government Accountability Office ruled in February 2005 that government-sponsored TV "news" reports are covert propaganda, unless their source is apparent to viewers. The Senate introduced the Truth in Broadcasting Act (S. 967) in 2005 into committee. This act would require all pre-packaged, government-produced audio and video news releases to include a clear disclaimer that the government was the original

source. This act would not apply to VNRs produced by corporations, industry groups, or charitable foundations. As of this writing, the full Senate has yet to vote on the bill and the no one has introduced a companion bill in the House of Representatives.

Media is controlled by only FIVE corporations

Looking at the amount of programming available, you might think that there is a wide variety of choice. There are literally hundreds of TV stations with options to choose from sports, news, cartoons, history, painting, and more. On the surface, the amount of options appears staggering. However, only five major corporations control the majority of the media. These five huge corporations—Disney, Time Warner, Bertelsmann of Germany, Murdoch's News Corporation, and Viacom (formerly CBS)—own not only most of the television stations, but now own most of the newspapers, magazines, books, and radio stations in the United States as well.

Television puts your logical brain to sleep

There is a reason people's eyes glaze over and they assume a zombie-like stare, when they are watching TV. Their brains are in a hypnotic, alpha brainwave state.

In the Mulholland experiment, 10 children watched their favorite television program, while the researchers monitored their brainwave patterns. The researchers expected that the children would show a preponderance of beta waves. This would indicate that they were involved and responding to their favorite programs. Instead, they stayed in alpha. "They just sat back. They stayed almost the whole time in alpha. That meant that while they were watching they were not reacting, not orienting, not focusing, just spaced out," said Dr. Eric Peper.

Similarly, in the early 1980's, researchers in Australia found that the left-brain "sort of went to sleep" once TV was switched on, but the right brain was busy "storing information in its memory bank."

What these studies show is that the right side of the brain may be dutifully absorbing all the images from your television screen, but the left side is lulled into a stupor by the television's flicker. This makes analysis of the images difficult. It also makes it difficult to remember exactly what you have been watching. Furthermore, the research suggests that the left side of the brain may remain in a stupor even after you turn the TV off.

What is a concerned citizen to do? How to dig for real news

1) The first step is to start reading, instead of watching, your news.

Television generally takes a lot of time to get across a little bit of information. With reading you can absorb information much faster. A five minute story on the news can be read online or in the newspaper generally in less than a minute. The spare time can be used to analyze the story.

2) The next step in developing a good picture of the world is to get several good news sources. Begin with a mainstream newspaper or website to simply get an idea of the basic issues that are at stake.

Then, select a couple of alternative news sources outside the mainstream. I am not going to recommend a particular source, because I do not wish to become engaged in liberal/conservative partisan discussions. These distinctions start to fall away once you start to analyze the news for yourself anyway.

3) The next step is simply to start critically viewing the material that you read. Does it make logical sense? Are there inconsistencies? Does the story change from one day to the next? Are there any patterns to events? This step is essential. Put that left brain into hyper-drive. Question the news you read, whatever the source.

4) Finally, if there are inconsistencies or notable patterns, it is time to start researching. Whenever possible it is best to go to the source of an issue. For example, if the government passes a new law about security, don't waste time watching or reading the petty analyses of pundits. Find a copy of the law! Do not rely on someone else to give an interpretation. The internet makes it much easier to find source documents.

In short, the good news is that you do not need TV news to become informed about the world.

About 'The Awful Truth About Television' Series:

What happens when the average American spends 4 hours 32 minutes every day watching television? Trash Your TV's 'The Awful Truth About Television' Series explores the multifaceted problems with TV in eleven hard-hitting articles. Read the full series and you will never look at your television set the same way again.

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