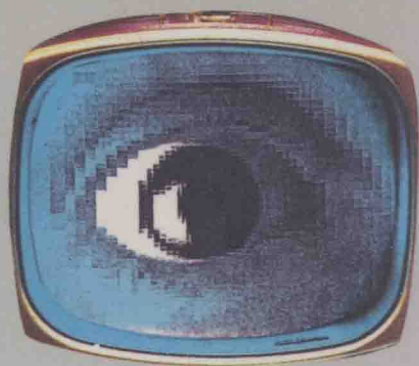
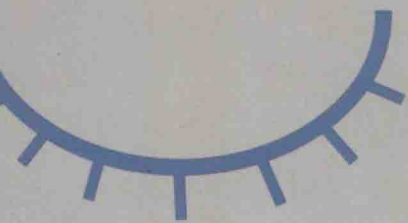


The Five Myths of Television Power



Or, Why the Medium Is Not the Message

DOUGLAS DAVIS



**THE FIVE MYTHS
OF TELEVISION
POWER**

OR

**WHY THE MEDIUM
IS NOT THE MESSAGE**

DOUGLAS DAVIS

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When driving from the ocean to the city the other night, I asked myself if I could possibly list here all the people and the teachings that made this book possible. *No*, my inner voice said, *it is impossible*. Well, let me dare my voice by beginning with Jane Bell, who has posed as my wife for some years. But in fact she is my editor and my intellectual guide as well as an example of someone who never gives in to adversity of any kind. Eugene M. Schwartz is another guide, with similar virtues. My recent students at Columbia University, UCLA, and Art-Center College never gave in, either to me or to the fat-bellied God I try here to slim down. Certainly I owe more than I ever thought before to both Rousseau and Pope, unlikely bedfellows. On several occasions I have been able to work and achieve in the shadow of the God's belly, that is, inside television, thanks to men and women like William R. Moll, Mary Perot Nichols, and their rare, exceptional counterparts at PBS, C-Span, ABC, German television, Austrian television, All-Russian TV, and Estonian TV. Several editors at the *New York Times* encouraged me to pursue this thesis in days when it was quite lonely, as did colleagues at *Newsweek* in an earlier era. Jerelle Kraus and Horacio Cardo lent dynamism and grace to the *Times* Op Ed page that announced the myths. Rafael Sagalyn, Jim Silberman, and Dominick Anfuso gave the idea book form. Amy Finkel was one

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New York, October 1992

To C.V. and her sisters

Me-di-um . . . n., pl.-dia . . . -diums for 1-10, adj.-n. 1. middle state or condition, mean. 2. something intermediate in degree. 3. an intervening substance, as air, through which a force acts or an effect is produced. 4. element that is the natural habitat of an organism . . . 6. an agency or instrument of something specified: a communications medium. 7. Biol. substance where specimens are displayed or preserved. 8. also called culture medium . . . 9. Fine Arts, a. painting. a liquid in which pigments are mixed. b. the material or technique with which an artist works. . . .

—CIE Dictionary

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PROLOGUE

THAT IS, THE END

It is important to say right away that I love television, sometimes. No one can change, effectively, a medium he despises. I despise only our perception of this medium, not the thing itself, which we have yet to discover.

I wrote this book to revise that perception. Unless we revise our expectations, none of the extraordinary technological changes now occurring, which make it possible for virtually any of us to send or receive any form of video message, enshrining the dream of the French revolution (to let every man *publish*), will transform "TV."

Yes, I love this thing that I also hate. Both passions date back to my childhood. I grew up in the midst of a family in Washington, D.C., that resisted television longer than anyone else I knew. The TV set came into my sphere of consciousness without endorsement or preconception. As soon as it arrived, I fell in love with Aletha Agee, the late-afternoon hostess of our local news-and-music show. She blew kisses to the viewer. I raced home after school almost every day, for a few months, to receive them. I sent more than a few back to her. At roughly the same time, I also discovered I could watch my local baseball heroes (the Washington Senators, perpetual losers) during the evening.

If Aletha and the Senators lured me inside the set, Luigi Pirandello changed my life. One night, when the Senators were rained out in the second inning, I switched the dial to find a live performance of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* on CBS. Despite myself, I could not turn it off. The next day, I went to the library to find out who Pirandello was.

It occurred to me that without a university education, I might not be able to pursue him, or his six characters.

Here, too, as in the case of the television set, my family's naivete, as well as its resistance, spurred me on. I think I decided very early to study every subject I could. I must have done so partly to prove that a university deserved its hard-earned dollars (my late father had attended one, briefly). But no sage uncle or aunt warned me, then, to take on an academic specialty. Left alone, I gorged on everything, on the arts, on history, on political science, on media theory, as well as on Pirandello. I embraced each with equal respect, if not adoration. The gravity with which I approached "television" is grounded in this innocence, you see. It wasn't until years later that colleagues explained that my early experience of *Six Characters* had been fatally compromised by the vulgar "medium" through which it came. As my Renaissance appetite disqualified me in other ways.

These truths came too late. The American intellectual's certainty that television is not a legitimate subject of analysis either as an art or as a science remains a wonder to me to this day. This prohibition trailed into my life after years of viewing, thinking, and conversing, mostly with myself. The Kennedy-Nixon debates were a singularly fruitful moment. I remember thinking the fate of the nation was resolving itself before my eyes. The debates seemed dense with *content* to me. I noticed that my cantankerous friends and family argued primarily about the policies advocated by each man, not about Kennedy's superior physique, which was a given before the debate. It was too late, again, when McLuhan and others decided the audience had ignored these differences, or when, even later, the essays of Stanley Cavell about television, which I warmly welcomed, were equally compromised, by their subject. What had seemed to me alive, as a child, infinite with possibility, was closed off in the following decades as a serious subject for debate, for discourse, and even for journalism, at a certain level.

While American society dismissed television on one level of discourse, it elevated the medium on another level to

imperial heights. We told ourselves that TV's magic powers so engulf our neighbors (if not you and me) that all objective matters of right and wrong, not to say the subtle shadings in between, are virtually irrelevant. This dogmatic conviction, repeated every day in one medium of discourse or another, fatally compromises our political rhetoric, our educational policies, our cultural habits, the often inferior products we design (for consumers who presumably can't tell right from wrong), and even our regard for our fellow citizens.

Let us destruct these myths, as well as the arrogance that supports them. The odds are certainly against me, to be sure, against all of us. There are certain to be cries of disbelief, particularly against my assertion that most of us *hate* what television became for more than four decades. When I am challenged on this score, I often ask my accuser to name a single friend or relative who says the reverse ("I *love* TV," or, "I'm so glad my children spend hours each day in front of my set"). I can't respond to each assailant, of course, in the press or standing near the copy of this book you are holding. And *the numbers* are against all of us, those abstract figures always cited to prove that millions of us embrace our TV sets, like long-lost lovers, every day.

But let me begin by planting a seed of doubt, as you prepare to enter this book. And this seed must be planted in the middle of the conceptual forest that is . . . the Numbers.

In the last days of writing this book, I found myself on the telephone with a blunt and witty executive at A.C. Nielsen, the source of the truly critical Numbers, that is, the "ratings" for each program. I told him I had heard that the new electronic "People Meter" system of audience measurement, introduced in the late 1980s, had altered these very Numbers. True or false? Immediately he laughed, then began to recount the revered months in early 1990, when the new Meters began turning in HUT (Houses Using Television) figures much lower than the old simplified system counted. The networks suddenly found themselves unable

to guarantee the huge Numbers their advertisers demanded, and expected. “The networks announced they wouldn’t accept the ratings,” he told me. They began to “adjust” the ratings, based on the glory days of the past. The advertisers, naturally, protested. I almost end my Prologue by excerpting from his testimony, which you will read in full later, in the chapter devoted to the last of our five myths:

We’ll never know what actually happened or who paid what to whom in 1990 and 1991. But certainly we know there was never universal acceptance of this “adjusted” guarantee of audience size. Now [early 1992] the rates are once again based on the current numbers. We are back to reality, such as it is.

Now don’t be overly impressed. This is just one seed of doubt. But . . . if the Numbers are in fact a *subjective* count . . . closer to Jell-O in truth than solid marble . . . then perhaps TV is not quite the superpower we have been led to believe that it is. Perhaps we need to doubt more, and more, in the pages to follow, moving toward the end of our blindness, and the beginning of something else. Perhaps finally all these seeds, planted here years after Aletha first kissed me, will flower into a fragile, wondrous, totally unexpected thing.