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TELEVISION, THE BOOK, AND THE CLASSROOM

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(Part 2 of 2)

BOOKS, TELEVISION, AND LEARNING

Keynote Address

Mortimer J. Adler

The letter I received from Mr. Boyer describing this occasion posed three questions to which he hoped I would address myself. From the way in which the questions were worded, slanted in the direction of the bookish member of this evening's little duet, I suspect that the questions put to Mr. Stanton were somewhat different. In any case, I liked the questions put to me and I would like to try to answer them. The three questions were:

First, what is the place of the book in a television society?

Second, what special qualities of the book ensure its central role in the learning process?

Third, how has television—the hours we spend with it and its content—affected our relations with books, with schooling, and with learning?

The second of these three questions seems to me to be the pivotal question and, therefore, I will deal with it first and with the remaining two questions later. The second question, as worded, appears to assume the superiority of the book in the learning process whether in school or after all schooling is completed. Please note, Mr. Stanton, that the question does not ask whether the book occupies a central role in the learning process. It asks why the book occupies that role. If the assumption here being made—that the book is indispensable to the learning process, as television is not—is doubted or challenged by anyone, then my first task is certainly to show why that assumption is thoroughly justified.

To do so with fairness to television, we are obligated to deal with all three elements under consideration at their very best. Not all books are good books; in fact most are not, as most television is not very good. In addition, schooling in this country at present is probably at its lowest ebb, and the state of adult learning is equally deplorable. It would be unfair to proceed as if the schools are doing the job they should be doing, and as if books are serving the purpose they should be serving, and then to consider television against the background of suppositions so contrary to fact. No, we must compare books at their very best with television at its very best in relation to schooling and the learning process as they should be, not as they are.

To make the comparison in that way, which seems to me the only fair way to make it, I think it is necessary, first, to summarize briefly the educational ideal appropriate to our kind of society—a technologically advanced industrial democracy (in order to be quite explicit about what schooling and learning should be like in our society); and then to state the three functions that books perform (in order to indicate the three respects in which television and books should be compared). I will proceed at once to these two preliminary matters, after which I will make the threefold comparison that will explain the superiority of books in relation to the learning process, in school or out of it, then deal with the two re-

maining questions that Mr. Boyer's letter posed, and finally state a few conclusions.

What should schooling and the learning process be like in our kind of society (an ideal that is far from being realized at present)? Elitism in any shape or form must be rejected, not only for the educational process itself but also for the use of books and of television. A society dedicated to universal suffrage and one in which technologically advanced industrialization provides every citizen with ample free time for the pursuits of leisure (preeminent among which is learning) is a society that should be dedicated to the principle of equal educational opportunity for all—all without exception. This calls not only for the same amount of basic schooling for all but also for the same quality of basic schooling for all—completely liberal schooling for all, without any trace of vocational training in it.

Such basic schooling should begin at age four and terminate at age sixteen with the B.A. degree. It should not aim to turn out educated or learned men and women, for that is an impossible task for the school to perform. Children cannot be made learned, any more than they can be made wise; for immaturity is an insuperable obstacle to both. But children can be made competent as learners, and they can be introduced to the world of learning and given the motivation to continue learning after they have left school. If our schools and colleges—up to the B.A. degree—did nothing else, they would be doing the very best that can be expected of them.

Schooling at its very best is only the beginning of the educational process. At its best, it is only a preparation for a lifetime of continued learning, which may ultimately produce an educated man or woman. It provides such preparation to the extent that it inculcates the liberal arts, which are the arts of learning—the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, measuring, and calculating. These are the arts of thinking as well, for there is no genuine learning (learning that is better than rote memory) which does not involve thinking. Learning does not consist in the passive reception of content that is committed to memory and regurgitated at some later time. It is not the activity of the teacher that is essential to learning, but the activity of the learner—intellectual activity that involves acts of understanding that involve the consideration of ideas. That is why Socrates always represents the ideal teacher, one who teaches by asking, not by telling, one who demands intellectual activity on the part of the learner, not passive reception.

So much for what schooling and learning should be, ideally. Now let me turn to the other of my two preliminary considerations—the three functions that books perform, with respect to which a comparison with television can be made. In *How To Read A Book*, first published almost forty years ago, I distinguished three different aims that we may have when we resort to books.

Our aim may be simply entertainment—at the lowest level, merely to pass away the time, for recreation or relaxation, for getting drowsy enough to go to sleep—and at higher levels, entertainment to engage our minds a little more than that, but nevertheless falling short of instructing us or elevating our minds. A second aim may be the acquirement of information or, beyond that, instruction in some field of organized knowledge.

The third purpose that books may serve is to improve our minds, not merely with respect to knowledge, but beyond that with respect to insight and understanding. Let me describe this third use of books as the process whereby the reading of books that are over our head enables us to lift our minds up from the state of understanding less to the state of understanding more. This third use of books need not exclude the first or second. Reading books for the sake of enlightenment may be pleasurable and entertaining; it may also be informative or instructive; but it is never merely that.

The rules set forth in *How To Read A Book*—and the liberal arts that will be acquired by following these rules—apply only to reading books for the third of these three purposes. They are not necessary for books read merely for entertainment, nor even for books read merely for information or factual instruction. Furthermore, there are only a few books worth reading for the sake of genuinely improving the mind, only a few that deserve the care and effort required by the rules set forth in *How To Read A Book*. Of the thirty-five or forty thousand books published in the United States each year, how many would you say deserve such careful and effortful reading? My estimate is less than a thousand. And of that thousand, how many deserve a second equally careful reading? Probably less than a hundred. And more than two careful readings—merely a handful at most. The last thing in the world that I am saying is that most books are good and most television is bad. On the contrary, I am saying very few books are good for the learning process as it should be carried on.

Let us begin the comparison of books and television by considering them with respect to a purpose both obviously serve the purpose of providing entertainment. Here it seems to me we are all

compelled to admit that TV at its best is about as good as books at their very best. It may be argued that the great novels and the great plays that have been produced on television are necessarily somewhat diminished in scope and substance by the exigencies of that medium. To this extent there may be more entertainment provided by books than by television. On the other hand, it can be said that the vividness of television—the power of verbal and pictorial narration combined as compared with the power of merely verbal narration—gives the superiority to television. However, for our present purpose, since we are concerned with the learning process, not with entertainment, we need not decide whether reading a play by Shakespeare or a novel by Dostoevsky is superior to seeing it on the stage or on the TV screen.

Next, let us consider books and television as conveyors of information and as instruments of factual instruction. Here, again, books and television come out about equal. Here, again, each may have superiority in one respect but not in another. It is, further, appropriate to consider here the role that educational films and educational television can play in the classroom. Considering them, as they are usually considered, as audio visual aids, they are just that and no more. To say that they are just audiovisual aids is to say that, in the learning process, properly carried on, they must be supplemented by other materials or means of learning: by the effort of the teacher, which at its best should consist in asking questions and conducting discussion, and by books that, at their very best—filled with illustrations, diagrams, maps, and so forth—can do the whole job almost as well as it can be done without resort to audiovisual aids. But it may be said that teaching films and teaching television may go beyond being audiovisual aids. They may be primary and independent sources of instruction and information about matters of fact. But even when they are so considered and, in addition, are as good as they can possibly be, they are no better than lectures delivered by a first-rate lecturer, accompanied in some instances by laboratory demonstrations, by slides, by charts, maps, and diagrams. To which I must add one further point; namely, that the best lecture is only second-best as a means of instruction, inferior to the Socratic procedure of asking questions and conducting discussion.

Finally, we come to the third purpose that books—the best books, I should say—can serve: the reading of books for the purpose of improving the mind by enlightening it, by activating the thinking process, by awakening ideas in it, by elevating it from understanding less to understanding more. Here television and books are incomparable, for books, or at least some books, the best books, can perform this function for those who have learned how to read, and

television cannot perform this function at all. Precisely because only books can perform this function, books and books alone require the learner to become disciplined in the liberal arts, the arts of reading and discussion, of asking questions and pursuing the answers to them. If there were no books—a contrafactual supposition that I hope our television society never turns into a statement of fact, if television were in fact the only medium of communication, there would be no occasion in the learning process, in school or out of it, for the acquirements of the liberal arts. Television may, in some rare instances, stimulate thinking, but it does not demand much skill in thinking, nor does it cultivate such skill. If books were not used in the learning process, and if our teachers fell far short of the power of Socrates (who cultivated the liberal arts without resort to books), I cannot imagine how or where in the learning process the liberal arts would be acquired, or how and where the mind would be enlightened by abstract ideas or disciplined in the skill of dealing with them. This, and this alone, is my basic challenge to Mr. Stanton as the exponent of television in this discussion. If he cannot meet it, then I rest my case. If he tries to, then I will resume my effort to show that he is wrong.

What is the place of the book in a television society? That is a factual, not a theoretical, question. The answer to it is that, in our television society, television has more and more resulted in the displacement of books in the learning process, not only for the young in school but for their elders in adult life. Why is this so? Why is it likely to be increasingly true? First, because there is a limited amount of free time at our disposal to use well or poorly. There is only so much of it; and if television preempts more and more of it, less and less of it will remain for the reading of books. Second, because of the weakness of the flesh, which naturally tends to take the easier path, the less effortful, the less strenuous. The more pleasurable and painless, the less active and effortful, will always tend to displace that which involves the painful effort required to learn by thinking.

I will have more to say on this point, presently, when, in my concluding remarks, I will comment on the pain of learning, a pain that all of us must have the courage to suffer in order to do what we should do for our minds. For the moment, I want to qualify what I have just said about the unfortunate effects that television has had in the displacement of books. The fault does not lie primarily with television. If the schools were doing the job they should be doing, if they were giving the young the liberal training they should provide, they would themselves act as the needed countervailing force to counteract the enticements of television.

The failure of the schools is the primary cause of the displacement of books by television. If the schools did their job properly, books would still reign supreme even in a television society.

The one remaining question is: how has television —the hours we spend with it and its content—affected our relations with books, with schooling, and with learning? The basic point I want to make here concerns the habit of mind that watching television cultivates. It is a habit of passive reception, sitting back and letting the bewitching images on the screen wash over one. This passive habit of mind is then transferred to the reading of books, which results in the kind of reading that does not deserve the name; for passive reading is not reading at all in any sense that is appropriate to the use of the best books for the enlightenment, elevation, and improvement of the mind.

This happens not only to children in school, who read passively, not actively, even the relatively poor books that they are assigned to read in the degraded curriculums that now prevail everywhere, not only in our high schools but also in our colleges. Little profit results from sitting down with a book, turning the pages, and letting its contents wash over the mind in the same way that one sits back and succumbs passively to television. When books are read in this way, they might just as well not be read at all, except to memorize for the sake of regurgitating the memorized content on examinations and then forgetting it. Certainly new ideas, new insights, better understanding cannot be acquired in this way. No thinking is involved and, therefore, little if any genuine learning.

Let me repeat what I have already said. Television cannot be blamed for the failure of the schools to do what they should do, even if it can be said that the amount of time consumed in watching television and the bad habit of mind that watching television forms make it more difficult for schools and teachers to do what they should be doing. Nor can television be blamed for the most widespread of all American misconceptions about learning—that it should all be fun, that if it cannot be made effortlessly pleasant, it should be avoided or only minimally endured.

To amplify this last point, I would like to conclude this address by quoting from an essay that I wrote in 1941. At that time, I had in mind the two very best educational programs on radio. One was the University of Chicago's Round Table; the other was a radio program —on CBS, I believe—called Invitation to Learning, conducted by two friends of mine, Mark Van Doren and Lyman Bryson. Both of these programs involved the discussion of im-

portant ideas and issues and, in the case of Invitation to Learning, the discussion of good books. Both resulted in the distribution on request to listeners of transcripts of the program. These transcripts always included bibliographies of recommended books to be read. Both programs regarded themselves as occasions for further learning by the reading of books.


The title of the essay I wrote in 1941 was Invitation to the Pain of Learning. The brunt of its criticism was directed at the schools, at the educators, and at the American public in general. The fundamental mistake being made by all of them, I tried to say, was their fallacious supposition that all learning should be fun, should be effortless and easy, not only in the classroom but throughout the whole of life. I have brought along with me copies of this paper that I will distribute to the conferees tomorrow morning. Now I will confine myself to quoting its concluding paragraphs:

“I do not know whether radio or television will ever be able to do anything genuinely educative. I am sure it serves the public in two ways: by giving them amusement and by giving them information. It may even, as in the case of its very best educational programs, stimulate some persons to do something about their minds by pursuing knowledge and wisdom in the only way possible—the hard way. But what I do not know is whether it can ever do what the best teachers have always done and must now be doing; namely, to present programs which are genuinely educative, as opposed to merely stimulating, in the sense that following them requires the listener to be active not passive, to think rather than remember, and to suffer all the pains of lifting himself up by his own bootstraps.

“Certainly so long as the so-called educational directors of our leading networks continue to operate on their present false principles, we can expect nothing. So long as they confuse education and entertainment, so long as they suppose that learning can be accomplished without pain, so long as they persist in bringing everything and everybody down to the lowest level on which the largest audience can be reached, the educational programs offered on the air will remain what they are today—shams and delusions.

“It may be, of course, that the radio and television, for economic reasons must, like the motion picture, reach with certainty so large an audience that the networks cannot afford even to experiment with programs which make no pretense to be more palatable and pleasurable than real education can be. It may be that the radio and television cannot be expected to take a sounder view of education and to undertake more substantial programs than now prevail

among the country's official leaders in education—the heads of our school system, of our colleges, of our adult education associations. But, in either case, let us not fool ourselves about what we are doing.

“Education all wrapped up in attractive tissue is the gold brick that is being sold in America today on every street corner. Every one is selling it, every one is buying it, but no one is giving or getting the real thing because the real thing is always hard to give or get. Yet the real thing can be made generally available if the obstacles to its distribution are honestly recognized. Unless we acknowledge that every invitation to learning can promise pleasure only as the result of pain, can offer achievement only at the expense of work, all of our invitations to learning, in school and out, whether by books, lectures, or radio and television programs will be as much buncombe as the worst patent medicine advertising, or the campaign pledge to put two chickens in every pot.” 

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