



1

+ Essay

ENGLISH 102
FINAL EXAM
FALL 2004- 2005

DON'T BLAME TV
by
Jeff Greenfield

1

One of the enduring pieces of folk wisdom was uttered by the 19th century humorist Artemus Ward, who warned his readers: "It ain't what you don't know that hurts you; it's what you know that just ain't so."

2

There's good advice in that warning to some of television's most vociferous critics, who are certain that every significant change in American social and political life can be traced, more or less directly, to the pervasive influence of TV.

3

It has been blamed for the decline of scores on scholastic achievement tests, for the rise in crime, for the decline in voter turnout, for the growth of premarital and extramarital sex, for the supposed collapse of family life and the increase in the divorce rate.

4

This is an understandable attitude. For one thing, television is the most visible, ubiquitous device to have entered our lives in the last 40 years. It is a medium in almost every American home, it is on in the average household some seven hours a day, and it is accessible by every kind of citizen from the most desperate of the poor to the wealthiest and most powerful among us.

5

If so pervasive a medium has come into our society in the last four decades, and if our society has changed in drastic ways in that same time, why not assume that TV is the reason why American life looks so different?

6

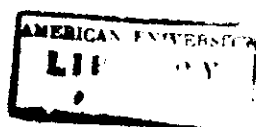
Well, as any philosopher can tell you, one good reason for skepticism is that you can't make assumptions about causes. They even have an impressive Latin phrase for that fallacy: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. For instance, if I do a rain dance at 5 P.M. and it rains at 6 P.M., did my dance bring down the rains? Probably not. But it's that kind of thinking, in my view, that characterizes much of the argument about how television influences our values.

7

It's perfectly clear, of course, that TV does influence some kinds of behavior. For example, back in 1954, *Disneyland* launched a series of episodes on the life of Davy Crockett, the legendary Tennessee frontiersman. A song based on that series swept the hit parade, and by that summer every kid in America was wearing a coonskin cap.

8

The same phenomenon has happened whenever a character on a prime-time television show suddenly strikes a chord in the country. Country women tried to capture the Farrah Fawcett look a decade ago when *Charlie's Angels* first took flight. Schoolyards from Maine to California picked up—instantly, it seemed—on such catch phrases as "Up your nose with a rubber hose!" (*Welcome Back, Kotter*), "Kiss my grits!" (*Alice*) and "Nanu-nanu!" (*Mork & Mindy*). Today, every singles bar in the land is



packed with young men in expensive white sports jackets and T-shirts, trying to emulate the macho looks of *Miami Vice's* Don Johnson.

9 These fads clearly show television's ability to influence matters that do not matter very much. Yet, when we turn to genuinely important things, television's impact becomes a lot less clear.

10 Take, for example, the decline in academic excellence, measured by the steady decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores from 1964 to 1982. It seemed perfectly logical to assume that a younger generation spending hours in front of the TV set everyday with Fred Flintstone and Batman must have been suffering from brain atrophy. Yet, as writer David Owen noted in a recent book on educational testing, other quality impassioned explanations for the drop in scores included nuclear fallout, junk food, cigarette smoking by pregnant women, cold weather, declining church attendance, the draft, the assassination of President Kennedy and fluoridated water.

11 More significant, SAT scores stopped declining in 1982; they have been rising since then. Is TV use declining in the typical American home? On the contrary, it is increasing. If we really believed that our societal values are determined by new media, we might conclude that the birth of MTV in 1981 somehow caused the test scores to rise.

12 Or consider the frequently heard charge that the increase in TV violence is somehow responsible for the surge in crime. In fact, the crime rate nationally has been dropping for three straight years. It would be ludicrous to "credit" television for this; explanations are more likely to be found in the shift of population away from a "youth bulge" (where more crimes are committed) and improved tracking of career criminals in many big cities.

13 But why, then, ignore the demographic factors that saw in America an enormous jump in teen-agers and young adults in the 1960s and 1970s? Why *assume* that television, with its inevitable "crime-does-not-pay" morality, somehow turned our young into hoodlums? The same kind of problem bedevils those who argue that TV has triggered a wave of sexually permissive behavior. In the first place, television was the most sexually conservative of all media through the first quarter-century of its existence. While Playboy began making a clean breast of things in the mid-1950s, when book censorship was all but abolished in the "Lady Chatterly's Lover" decision of 1958, when movies began showing it all in the 1960s, television remained on oasis-or-desert-of twin beds, flannel nightgowns and squeaky-clean dialogue and characters.

14 In fact, as late as 1970, CBS refused to let Mary Tyler Moore's, Mary Richards character be a divorcee. The audience, they argued, would never accept it. Instead, she was presented as the survivor of a broken relationship.

15 Why, then, do we see so many broken families and divorces on television today? Because the networks are trying to denigrate the value of the nuclear family? Hardly. As *The Cosby Show* and its imitators show, network TV is only too happy to offer a benign view of loving husbands, wives and children.

16 The explanation, instead, lies in what was happening to the very fabric of American life. In 1950, at the dawn of television, the divorce rate was 2.6 per 1000 Americans. By 1983, it had jumped to five per thousand; nearly half of all marriages were ending in divorce. The reasons range from the increasing mobility of the population to the undermining of settled patterns of work, family, and neighborhood.

17 What's important to notice, however, is that it was not television that made divorce more acceptable in American society; it was changes in American society that made divorce more acceptable on television. (Which is why, in her new sitcom, Mary Tyler Moore can finally play a divorced woman.) In the mid 1980s, divorce has simply lost the power to shock.

18 That same argument, I think, undermines much of the fear that television has caused our young to become sexually precocious. From my increasingly dimming memory of youthful lust, I have my doubts about whether young lovers really need the impetus of *Dallas* or *The Young and the Restless* to start thinking about sex. The more serious answer, however, is that the spread of readily available birth control was a lot more persuasive a force in encouraging premarital sex than the words and images on TV.

19 We can measure this relative impotence of television in a different way. All through the 1950s and early 1960s, the images of women on TV were what feminists would call "negative"; they were portrayed as half-woman, half-child, incapable of holding a job or balancing a checkbook or even running a social evening. (How many times did Lucy burn the roast?) Yet the generation of women who grew up on television was the first to reject forcefully the wife-and-home-maker limitations that such images ought to have encouraged. These were the women who marched into law schools, medical schools and the halls of Congress.

20 The same was true of the images of black Americans, as TV borrowed the movie stereotypes of shiftless handymen and relentlessly cheerful maids. We didn't begin to see TV blacks as the equal of whites until Bill Cosby showed up in *I Spy* in 1966. Did the generation weaned on such fare turn out to be indifferent to the cause of black freedom in America? Hardly. This was the generation that organized and supported the civil-rights sit-ins and freedom rides in the South. Somehow the reality of second class citizenship was far more powerful than the imagery of dozens of television shows.

21 I have no argument with the idea that television contains many messages that need close attention; I hold no brief for shows that pander to the appetite for violence or smarmy sexuality or stereotyping. My point is that these evils ought to be fought on grounds of taste and common decency. We ought not to try and prove more than the facts will bear. Television, powerful as it is, has shown precious little power over the most fundamental values of Americans. Given most of what's on TV, that's probably a good thing. But it also suggests that the cries of alarm may be misplaced.

First appeared in TV Guide (Jan. 1986)

**ENGLISH 102
FINAL EXAM
FALL 2004 – 2005**

Name: _____
ID #: _____

Instructor: _____

Allocated Time: 2 hrs. & 30 mins.

I. MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS (30 points)

Circle the **CORRECT** answer:

1. The author, Greenfield, views the relationship between television and society as such:
 - a. Television plays a tremendous role in promoting social change
 - b. Television has absolutely no influence on society
 - c. Television has led to a decline in academic excellence
 - d. Television programming is a reflection of changes in social values

2. In this selection, all of the below have been considered by society as negative effects of TV watching **EXCEPT**:
 - a. The disappearance of family life
 - b. The decrease of grades in scholastic tests
 - c. The equality between blacks and whites
 - d. The increase in divorce percentages

3. Which kind of concrete support does the author use **most**?
 - a. Examples
 - b. Reference to authority
 - c. Personal experience
 - d. Statistics

4. According to the author, those who first supported women's rights in the 1950's and 1960's were not influenced by the images of
 - a. Professional women on TV
 - b. Traditional women on TV
 - c. Strong men on TV
 - d. Depressed women on TV

5. The passage is primarily
 - a. A description of the process of development of TV programs from the mid twentieth century to the present.
 - b. An overview of a number of famous TV shows that have been aired over the past 50 years or so.
 - c. An analysis of why TV should be considered as having little influence on American values.
 - d. A comparison of TV shows in the 1950's, 60's and 70's to TV shows nowadays.

II. COMPREHENSION AND RHETORICAL QUESTIONS (55 points)

1. In your own words, formulate a thesis statement for this essay. (10 pts.)

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Give two specific examples from the text that the author employs to highlight the immediate effects of television watching on our behavior. (10 pts.)

a. Example:.....
.....
Para:.....

b. Example:.....
.....
Para:.....

3. Which paragraph serves as a transition to the idea that television is not solely responsible for some of our problems? Justify your answer. (5 pts.)

.....
.....
.....

4. What, according to the author, are the real causes of the following problems? (12 pts.)

a. Decline in academic scores

.....
.....
.....
.....

b. Sexually permissive behavior

.....
.....
.....
.....

c. Increase in divorce rate

.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Paraphrase paragraph 9: "These fads clearly show television's ability to influence matters that do not matter very much. Yet, when we turn to genuinely important things, television's impact becomes a lot less clear."(10 pts.)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

6. How does the phrase "cries of alarm" in the selection's closing sentence link the conclusion to the introductory paragraphs? (8 pts.)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

III. VOCABULARY (15 pts.)

1. Write synonyms for the following words: (3 pts. each)

- a. "emulate"(para.8)
- b. "benign"(para.15).....
- c. "ludicrous"(para.12).....

2. The word "ubiquitous"(para.4) means: (2 pts.)

- a. Absent
- b. Primitive
- c. Widespread
- d. Harmful

3. Find a phrase in paragraph 20 with the same meaning as "persistently happy" (4 pts.)

.....
.....

**ENGLISH 102
FINAL EXAMINATION
FALL 2004-2005**

ESSAY TOPICS

Choose ONE of the following topics and write a well-organized and concise essay of 4-5 paragraphs. Be sure to give a title, and underline your thesis. **DO NOT** choose a topic that you have already done in class.

1. Do you believe that too much TV viewing may contribute to such social ills as drug abuse, crime or divorce? **Describe/Discuss giving illustrations and examples.**

2. What are some of the *positive/negative* **effects** of excessive TV viewing here in Lebanon?

3. **Write a description or an illustration** essay to support the idea that "clothes make the man", i.e., that the idea people have of you is strongly influenced by the way you dress.

4. We like to think that we are different from our parents, but, like it or not, we 'suffer' from many similarities. Write a **comparison and contrast** essay that discusses this idea.

Over