Jennifer Beal

Professor Roth

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Land of the Free, Home of the..?

 In her essay "The Dumbing of America", author Susan Jacoby describes how "Americans are in serious intellectual trouble. . ."(364). She points out that as time progresses, we as Americans become more intellectually unstable despite the advances in technology and the increase in school participation. This instability, she argues, causes our standards and expectations to decrease while our ignorance of our lack of knowledge progressively inflates. Throughout her article, Jacoby recognizes that much of the decline in knowledge comes from developmental disruptions brought on by our use of media sources including TV, video game consoles, and computers. Although the advances in technology have helped us progress forward as a society, the consequences of those advances have become quite apparent in recent experimentation. Throughout the past three decades, multiple studies have been performed to accentuate the assumption that the use of media, although helpful, can cause semi-permanent damage to a growing brain and a child's development. During these experiments, it has been found that access to excessive amounts of computers, video games, and television tends to promote laziness and obesity, boosts learning disabilities, and endorses aggressive tendencies.

 In an article written by Pediatricians Strasburger, Jordan, and Donnerstein, they elaborate on how media use contributes to many of the concerns gripping the children of America today. Among the epidemics sweeping the nation currently, the most distressing health concern is the increase in childhood obesity and laziness. The main component of this national plague is said to be the food advertising campaign targeted towards swaying children's and adolescent's eating habits and food preferences. In one study, Strasburger, Jordan, and Donnerstein found that "children and teenagers see 4,400-7,600 ads per year for junk food and fast food on television alone." Alongside this propaganda to promote unhealthy eating, it has also been found that watching TV inhibits our brain's ability to send messages to our stomach to tell us when we are full, which often leads to an increase in unconscious eating and calorie consumption. This lack of brain communication is supported by Jacoby when she states ". . . parents may see their vibrant and active children gazing silently, mouths agape, at the screen"(365). Along these same lines, but even more disturbing, is the fact that "although the evidence that television displaces physical activity is equivocal, researchers are now examining whether heavy media use, particularly at nighttime, displaces sleep"(Strasburger et al.). Sleep, as most of us know, is a very important aspect to our physical/mental well being and in the promotion of healthy energy levels. Lack of sleep in children has been found to have a strong correlation with the current weight epidemic and has shown an increased likelihood to lead to a sedentary adult lifestyle, which increases the risk of future health problems.

 Another strong concern about American children and their heavy use of media is the increase in attention complications and learning disabilities nationwide. Research has found that "youth spend an average of 7+ hours per day using media. . ."(Strasburger et al.). This fact would be very frightening for any parent considering ". . . there is no evidence that focusing on a screen is anything but bad . . ." (Jacoby 365). Unease also comes from the proof that there is a strong correlation between heavy media use and the increased amount of diagnosed cases of ADD among children six years old and up. ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, is among the most difficult disorders to battle for both parents and teachers alike and often causes severe learning delays during the early school years. Cognitive processes, such as increasing vocabulary and learning language, are at greater risk of complication and can be permanently hindered with large amounts of screen viewing. In her article, Jacoby states that ". . . University of Washington researchers found that babies between 8 and 16 months recognized an average of six to eight fewer words for every hour spent watching videos"(365). As you can imagine, this decrease in vocabulary and learning ability can greatly impact a child's chances of learning and understanding material offered in the public school system. Because of this dilemma, school's in the United States have been encouraged to adopt programs such as the No Child Left Behind Act, "an educational bill enacted in 2002 by President George W. Bush during his first term in office"(Seldman). Programs such as this require schools to maintain a certain percentage of progress per year, helping to close the educational learning gaps in public schools. Most of the responsibility, however, falls upon the parents of these children. By monitoring their child's use of media and taking an interest in their child's education by promoting healthy studying habits, many of the problems facing these kids could be easily avoided.

 To many Americans today, the most horrifying aspect of excessive amounts of media use is the increase in aggressive tendencies among today's youth. According to Strasburger, Jordan, and Donnerstein, "by the age of 18, the average adolescent will have seen an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television alone." These acts, often performed in a humorous and tolerated fashion, depict acts of violence as glamorized and acceptable, promoting this behavior in the impressionable youth. Unfortunately, TV is not the only culprit for promoting aggression because in today's day and age, over 90% of video games contain some sort of violence. Together, video games and TV pass off brutality as a justifiable means to solve a problem, often portraying a good versus bad persona, which increases the likelihood of the behavior to be repeated. Consequently, current research has found that "the relationship between media violence and real-life aggression is nearly as strong as the impact of cigarette smoking on lung cancer"(Strasburger, et. al). According to research, the greatest problems tend to arise when the characters are attractive and do not receive an equivalent punishment to the crime committed. Strasburger, Jordan, and Donnerstein explain that this confusion ". . . can lead to anxiety and fear, acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of solving conflict, and desensitation with resulting increases in aggression and decreases in altruism." In most forms of media, there is often no explanation between the fiction on TV and the reality that we live in, therefore it falls upon the parents once again to promote the behavior expected in real society. Unfortunately, many parents nowadays fail at this task, whether by inattention or denial, leading to the recent spikes in the amount of violent crimes committed by young children and the formation of new aggressive techniques, such as cyber bulling and harassment.

 As studies have shown throughout history, the advancements in media can be very beneficial when used properly, but as we continue to push forward in our pursuit of knowledge as a nation, we must take into account the consequences that come along with every new discovery. With the epidemic of aggression, learning disorders, and obesity on the rise, perhaps, in the long run, the consequences of discovery far outweigh its advantages.

Works Cited

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