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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Israeli students' memories of television in the context of family life, and considers culture and systems as well. The study was geared toward broadening the understanding of individuals' perceptions of the role of television in the family, as well as gaining insight into the collective story or stories of life with television in Israel. Forty-three Israeli university students were asked to write about their personal histories and experiences of and with television; similar autobiographies by American students from a study in the late 1980s were used for comparison. The analysis of the autobiographies covered the categories of television use, interaction, play and imitation, cognition, emotions, consumer behavior, and national identity/world knowledge. The analysis showed that most respondents had pleasant memories of watching the children's programs on ITV, remembered the introduction of color television, and grew up in families that did not limit viewing, except perhaps for homework time. Many remembered television as a tool for bringing the family together; the introduction of cable was seen to cause disagreements over what to watch. Many students reported a feeling of nostalgia for earlier days when the family watched together, and many expressed a kind of fear of the new television environment for children. Some wrote about the importance of the medium during times of crisis. Television seemed to become less important to students as they pursued university studies and developed critical attitudes toward it. Respondents from non-majority groups--for example, Israeli Arabs--reported somewhat different experiences with the medium. (Contains 10 references.) (EV)

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Remembering Life with Television:

An Analysis of Israeli Students' TV Autobiographies

by

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Introduction

This paper is an analysis of Israeli students' memories with television in the context of family life. While it takes family into account, it is also an effort to take culture and systems into account. We should keep in mind that Israel, with a different television system, different societal norms, values, culture, and different attitudes toward the family, provides a distinct and unique context for looking at life with television. The rapidly changing media environment of the past decade in Israel has seen the country go from having one station since 1968 to including cable channels with a wide range of international offerings in the early 1990's and a national commercially funded channel in 1993 (Katz, 1996; Weimann, 1996). This analysis provides an opportunity to compare and contrast the histories of students who experienced childhood within a very different media landscape than those who have traditionally been subjects of media research. It is geared toward broadening our understanding of individuals' perceptions of the role of television in the family, as well as gaining insight into the collective story or stories of life with television in Israel.

Research conducted in the US and England has led us to draw a number of conclusions about television and its role in the family. Television is an important part of family life--families spend the bulk of their leisure time with television. We also know that quite a bit of co-viewing goes on and that discussion of programs between parents and children can help children to understand content, to help them become critical viewers, and to help them better remember educational messages. However, most co-viewing is done without that kind of interaction. Some families use tv to unite the family--although talk may be minimal, touching increases. In some families amount of viewing can be related to family tension (see Dorr and Rabin (1995) for an overview).

Much family interaction about television focuses on its use--including parental rules, selection of programs, and other power issues--such as who is in charge of the remote control. We know that conflicts can arise over television use--especially with regard to amount of use and program choice (Morley, 1986).

While public fears have been raised concerning television with regard to decline of family interaction, increased conflict, and reduction in family unity, research has not proven these fears to be based in reality. What research does suggest is that television use is predicted by family rules. So it is time to ask the research question differently.

Alison Alexander (Alexander, 1994) suggests that communication researchers have asked the question: "How do media influence family interaction?" But, the more interesting question is: "What is the relationship of media and family communication?" This question suggests that both the family (with its numerous variations) and the media (also not uniform) interact with each other. Effects do not simply flow out of the media to the family, but the family is a powerful force in determining how media is used and what kinds of experiences the family will have with it, as well as how family communication patterns are related to media use, and the place of media in the family.

Alexander suggests that a possible site of research should be outside of the media use context because quite a bit of family communication that is linked to media and media content takes place outside of actual use. Media effects on family interaction would include discussions of media or other communication concerning media. This might involve discussion of rules, use, limits, planning viewing, etc. Also, she suggests that we should study indirect relation of text and interaction. Meaning creation occurs in the process of interpretation that may take place during later discussion or reflection apart from the media use context. Alexander also raises the idea of narrative or story-telling. She suggests that we should look at the ways in which mediated stories become a part (or do not become a part) of a family's or individual's narrative.

These kinds of approaches make the connections between media and families more complex, but will hopefully provide insight into patterns and processes by which families relate to the broader society and culture.

Some research that has looked at television and the family and that has taken a more family systems oriented approach is that of Bryce (1986) who examined families' relationships to time to see how it might relate to television use. Time use is characterized as monochronic or polychronic (pg.130) and Bryce found that orientation to time was related to how the families used television.

Other studies have tried to characterize childrens' interactions with television in terms of their family communication patterns (Dorr, pg, 341).

Robert Kubey's research (Kubey, 1994) has involved using beepers to study people's activities and feelings. In these studies, they beep people 6-8 times over the course of a week and have them fill out a form indicating what they were doing, where they were, how they were feeling. Kubey found that while conversation does go down during television viewing, still much of it goes on (36% of non-tv family time spent talking, 20% family tv time). Kubey submits that the longer people view, the worse they feel.

Methodology

In the spring semester of 1997, forty-three Israeli students in a Media Literacy course at the University of Haifa were asked to write about their personal histories and experiences of and with television in order to catalyze their thinking about the implications of television in their own lives as individuals, as family members, and as members of society. There were twelve men and thirty-one women. Three of the women were Israeli Arabs and one woman was a Druze. The assignment (Appendix 1) was the first exercise given in the course. The first author had previous experience with this type of assignment and found that students both in this course and in previous courses reacted positively to being encouraged to reflect on their own personal experiences with television as a way of beginning the process of becoming more critical users of the medium and its content. The assignment was originally adapted from a life history research instrument developed for a study of young people's experiences with newspapers (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991). A similar set of forty-three student autobiographies was collected and analyzed by an American lecturer and researcher in the late 1980's (Spangler, 1989). Although the two sets of autobiographies were collected in quite different times and places, we have decided to borrow elements from Spangler's analytical framework and will take advantage of those results to serve as a basis for comparison.

In Spangler's study, a number of topic areas for discussion were generated, based on the subjects' autobiographies and we have adopted most of those categories for this analysis. Overlapping categories include: television use, interaction, play and imitation, cognition, and emotions. Beyond those we have included sections on television-related consumer

behavior and national identity/world knowledge. Spangler pointed out, and we reiterate, that the autobiographical method is, like other methods, not without its problematic aspects. We can neither vouch for the correctness of memories nor accuracy of accounts of uses and effects. Never the less, these autobiographies provide material that can broaden our understanding of the relationships between audiences and the television. An analysis such as this one, which includes reports from two different cultures and time frames can increase our appreciation of cultural differences and similarities with respect to the medium.

Television Use

As with the American students, entertainment and escapism were frequently reported by Israeli students as a central motivation for watching television as children. Contrary to the Americans, information seeking was rarely mentioned as a childhood reason for watching television, but was reported as a current reason for watching by many of the subjects.

Another difference was in reporting the watching of television for companionship. Only one of the Israeli students, an only child, wrote that she used to watch television to overcome feelings of loneliness, whereas this was not an unusual theme in the American autobiographies. Unlike the Americans, who recalled Saturday morning television which was specifically geared toward the child audience, Israelis did not report weekend experiences with television. The Israeli television didn't broadcast on Saturday mornings and thus the Saturday morning programs remain a definitively American experience. Interestingly, one Israeli student, who had spent the first years of his life in the US, recalled this experience of Saturday morning viewing. Watching television was, for the Israelis, a part of the daily after-school activities. With the single day weekend in Israel it is possible that even with Saturday programming now available, the weekend viewing may not become the institution it once was for children in the US, as Israeli families tend to participate in shared family activities on the weekends. It would be interesting to view this question in the present media reality in Israel.

Israelis and Americans reported watching television for social reasons. Israelis and Americans reported television programs to be a major topic in peer discussions. Israeli,

like American children, watched specific programs in order to be able to participate in conversations with peers at school the next day. Even the programs that were mentioned in that respect were the same, including American shows, like Dallas (that aired in Israel in the 1980s) and for the younger subjects, the much more recent Beverly Hills 90210 (that has been broadcast on cable). Some of the American and the Israeli students reported that they were not allowed to watch those popular shows by their parents and felt left out of the conversations. Americans remembered watching certain shows to show that they were “in the know” or “cool”, even if they did not particularly like the programs. Some Israelis admitted to watching programs they thought were “stupid”, just to fit in the conversation. Clearly this practice of using television to exhibit social awareness is a common theme across the cultures.

Interaction

Some of the Israeli parents, like their American counterparts, according to the students reportedly used television as an incentive, but Israelis reported this discipline method to be related to their studies. Many had to finish their homework before watching television, while Americans reported having to finish household chores for the privilege. In both countries there were many differences within families as to the usage of television. Some parents were trying to restrict the content of the viewing, creating frustration among the children, especially when the shows were being watched by peers. Others did not interfere with the children’s viewing. Some of the Israeli parents encouraged their children to watch specific programs, due to their perceived educational value. Perception of content as being educational and beneficial is not reported by the Americans. Given the fact the Israeli television was broadcasting educational programs for children, this attitude is quite understandable.

Conflicts in the families over what programs would be watched are reported in both countries, however in Israel these conflicts began only with the introduction of the new channels. The conflicts noted prior to that included the demands to be quiet during the highly rated 9 PM news program Mabat (Katz, 1995). According to many of the students, the father was the one who was watching the news and demanded quiet. Nearly all the

subjects remembered their families, and in particular their fathers, watching the news, while they were supposed to maintain silence.

Like in many other families, when the television broadcast the news, an utter silence prevailed. Whoever broke the silence for a matter that wasn't "a life or death situation" was severely reprimanded. If there was one program that I didn't watch as a child and was even resentful towards, for brutally cutting the light broadcasting schedule, it was the news broadcast. . . the afternoon program was even more outrageous, since it appeared in the middle of the afternoon broadcasting, that belonged to me in terms of viewing and not during the evenings that belonged to the grownups and during which I was a "fifth wheel". I resented both programs that presented my father's victory over me on our struggle over the remote control.

Power and control over program choice and styles of viewing of both Americans and Israelis as reflected in the autobiographies were very similar. The father was often but not *always* the dominant person in the family regarding the viewing. In some families a process of negotiation was involved and in others the children had the control. However, the mother was *never* reported to be the dominant one.

One American subject described her father putting a sign on the TV, demanding quiet (Spangler, p. 8).

All of the Israelis reported changes in television viewing, family interactions and decrease in the quality of the programs with the introduction of cable channels and the Israeli commercial station in the early 1990's. As noted above, in most families, conflicts began or increased. After the introduction of the new channels, many of the Israeli families resolved the conflicts over programming by buying second and third television sets.

Even though watching television in the "public television era" was not actively perceived to be a uniting activity by most of the subjects, purchasing more television sets was reported as a negative, isolating phenomenon.

A certain solution to my problems arrived when I was about eighteen. My father bought another television set and put it in my room. As a consequence of this 'dramatic event', fighting with my brother over the remote control stopped completely, but there were negative consequences as well. I used to go to sleep later, because I was watching television in my bed. A situation was created when I was in one room, watching television and my brother was in another, which created an estrangement between me and my brother. Sometimes there was an

absurd situation, when my brother and I were watching the same program in different rooms without even being aware of it!

Subjects with younger siblings view them as heavier media consumers than they themselves were at that age. The end of innocence is consistently referred to in that regard. The older siblings are critical of their younger, “media-addicted” siblings but at the same time also view them as more sophisticated.

When I look at my 10-year-old sister, the ultimate consumer of the Children’s Channel, I note an apparent difference between her viewing patterns and mine at her age. I think that she will remember only few programs. She might remember one or two children’s programs, but not more. She will remember presenters . . . ‘stars’ of faked charm, over-groveling, suffering from exaggerated talkativeness, lacking innocence and presenting a boring, monotonous, Tel Aviv, Yuppie image... they all buy their clothes at the same store. But maybe it’s only me that had changed, because it is hard to argue with success. I see my sister glued to the screen and only an electric short-circuit could unplug her from her frozen position in front of channel 6.

The American subjects reported, besides the conflict, “a wealth of fond memories... of watching with particular people.” (Spangler, p. 10). Interestingly, Israelis did not describe similar experiences. Shared watching was described without special emotions. Perhaps other shared experiences had more emotional impact in Israeli culture. Israeli students describe other activities, especially playing outdoors with friends as a competing activity to watching television and most of them report preferring those activities to watching television. Having those activities as important in bonding might explain the lower importance of television as a shared activity.

Play and imitation

The Israeli students did not describe imitation of television in the context of games and pretend play as did the Americans. Watching television was described as an activity that was an alternative to playing outdoors with other children. Some reported preferring other activities, while others admitted that television was an important activity for them and even described it as an addiction.

Many students remembered how they used to sing songs from the programs they watched as young children, but only one reported identification with television characters at a very

young age. One explanation for the difference between American subjects and Israelis and the lack of identification among Israeli children might be the content of the programs themselves. Those programs were produced by the educational television and presented puppets. Perhaps the lack of child characters on television prevented or decreased identification.

. . . I tended to prefer television programs that involved people, more than puppets . . . the program 'Riz-Raz' . . . dominated by children which probably created identification with that age group...Programs that didn't match my taste were 'Telepele' and 'Kishkashta' that were dominated by talking puppets that I perceived as an unnatural, imposed attempt to convince us of something that was not real, even though I didn't know for sure what was behind those puppets. Curiosity probably stopped me from liking them and maybe even made me afraid of them.

This testimony demonstrates how the concepts of identification, emotion and cognition overlap when analyzing the relationship and effects of television on children and perhaps of television on people at all ages.

While most of the Israeli students did not relate to the idea of identification with television characters, those who did mentioned this identification as a something that developed when they were teenagers. Identification and imitation were reported specifically regarding love, romantic relationships, and sexuality. One student remembered trying to imitate American behavior in her clothes and eating "junk food". A male student said he imitated kisses he had seen on television when he experienced his first "real" kiss.

Not only identification, but the amount of viewing is reported to have increased in the teen years. The subjects themselves explain this increase as part of the teen culture. They also related it to the change from black and white to color television.

Cognition

Many of the Israeli students described their first experiences with television in relation to their ability to read. The ability to read symbolized independence for many Israeli children and was an important step not only in growing up, but in the ability to participate independently in the viewing experience. It seems that for Israelis, the exposure to television was gradual, not only because of its different rate of diffusion compare to the

US, but because of the necessity to be literate in order to understand many of the programs.

My experience is divided into two periods: the preschool (gan), when I didn't know how to read and write and school, in which I gradually began to learn to read and write. In the preschool era, I experienced my real first viewing experience, even though I didn't understand most of the programs I watched. The viewing was with my parents and was accompanied with questions like: "What does he say? Why does he laugh? What is written down there?" My parents at this age were like translators, until the second period, of school, when I began reading that at first was slow. That was a challenge for me. The goal was to finish reading all the subtitles before they changed without missing out words. "Little House in the Prairie" was the first series in which I made my first attempts, with the encouragement of my parents and older siblings. When I succeeded, I had a feeling of pride and achievement even though in the beginning I didn't quite comprehend what I was reading. As time went by, reading turned out simple and easy and I learned to read the subtitles and simultaneously look at the pictures and understand the meanings. Therefore, already in my early childhood, television was a daily educational tool that helped me acquire fast and correct reading tools.

Emotions:

Although most of the Israeli students had fond memories of specific television programs and dedicated long paragraphs to nostalgic descriptions of their content, when emotions were mentioned, they were usually negative. The most prevalent and strong emotional response that was described by many of the subjects was fear, especially at young ages. The fear at those young ages is usually related to a fascination with the television and its seemingly magical qualities. This can be attributed to developmental differences in cognition and understanding of reality and fiction which are characteristic of young children. Some of the subjects remembered specific public service announcements and programs that frightened them, as well as their parents' attempts to calm them down. One male subject recalled the fear and the later triumph over a puppet from an educational program that aimed at teaching English.

When I try to remember my first encounter with the television, the strongest feeling that is rising is **fear**. . . every time this puppet appeared, I used to get completely panicked and I was sure that in a minute this creature would get out of the screen and come out to yell at me . . . After a few years when I was studying English in school, I happened to see that puppet and it looked so small

and ridiculous, that I didn't even recognize it at first. I didn't understand why this puppet frightened me so much and I sensed a sweet feeling of triumph and revenge, when I suddenly saw this terrible creature that used to terrorize me as a small, pathetic puppet.

Fear was mentioned by American students as well, but only in the context of horror shows and not as a consequence of watching television itself. It is possible that the Israeli television did not broadcast horror movies and therefore the Israeli children were less desensitized and more influenced by the content. The difference though, might indicate higher levels of general anxiety among Israeli children. If this is indeed an indicative sign for differences between the two societies, it might be related to two contextual factors. The first would be the novelty of the television experience in Israel. In contrast to the American children who were born to households with television and therefore "grew up" with it, this group of Israeli students recalled when the first television set was brought home and therefore might have been more mystified by it as a novel experience. Secondly, Israeli children who grew up in the 1970s were exposed to many news reports about terrorism inside Israel, with many casualties, of which many were children. It is interesting to note that not even one of the subjects mentioned those attacks, although surely they had a lasting impact. Emotional effect is something that might be hard to sort out and identify from childhood. The memories may have been too painful for the students to consider using as part of their assignment. Students related to emotion as adult viewers reporting a greater feeling of control of the viewing, choosing programs according to their "moods", for example turning on a light sitcom when they were sad or stressed. Such affect-related effects and uses were reported by Morley (1988) with regard to viewers in Great Britain. However, some of the subjects discussed a particular aspect of television that characterizes Israeli reality—that of television's major impact in times of national disasters or crises. Those students (as adults) who wrote about this aspect of television broadcasting reported that watching television increased feelings of grief and sadness and connected them to a national feeling of loss. In our globalized world of CNN, even being in another country apparently doesn't make a difference in subjects' ability and emotional need to be part of

the tragedies via the media, as this young male student, who worked in a security job outside of Israel, discovered:

When I lived overseas my relationship with television took a different course. Everywhere I've been I received CNN. That was an important communication channel for me, especially during the difficult times that our little country experiences too often. In the 'season of the buses' bombing' every shred of information, every picture strengthened the longing to my blood-dripping country and the city in which I was born and lived all my life, Jerusalem, that became a wounded animal. Another experience that I will forever remember and that television has a monopoly over is Rabin's murder. CNN broadcast for 48 hours only stories that covered the murder and all I had left to do was to cry with the television in one of the most difficult moments that I and the Israeli nation had had- and all this difficult experience I had experienced via the remote control and experienced it deeply!

Television-related Consumer Behavior

Unlike the US, television in Israel wasn't constructed around, or by, commercials. Only when the private, "second" channel joined the "first" public channel, did the Israeli viewer experience exposure to television advertisements. Television advertising, as opposed to advertisements on radio, film and print, is a new phenomenon in Israel. It is no wonder then, that Israelis do not recall buying things as a consequence of television viewing. However, the public service announcements did have effects on some of the children. Some remember them as part of the culture and as one item in the television context, just like the programs. One subject was so influenced by those public announcements as a child, that he convinced his mother to quit smoking.

National identity and world knowledge

While most Israeli students wrote that television did not affect their political views, one student wrote that the election propaganda directly influenced his voting decision. Another student in summarizing his personal experiences with television, experiences that were marked by a specific media context and revealed strong feelings of national identity and local belonging, provided a text that was strikingly cosmopolitan.

It is hard for me to pinpoint a specific behavior that was influenced by television... but I don't delude myself, and I know it has a powerful impact beyond the effects I can see and be aware of. A large proportion of what I know about the world, society and its norms came from television . . . One of the

experiences I recall was my first kiss that was 'televisual' and it would be interesting to know how it would have looked if it wasn't for the rich experience I acquired through theoretical kissing. Actually most of our knowledge of reality we get from television. I know what an operating room looks like, a government meeting hall, a cockpit, a jail cell, hunger in Africa, holocaust, nuclear explosion, a Pink Floyd concert and an endless list of places and happenings I have never experienced and probably won't ever experience without the television.

General Themes of the Israeli autobiographies

Most of the students were Jewish Israelis who were non-kibbutz members and had spent all the years of childhood in Israel. In general they had pleasant memories of watching the children's programs on ITV, remembered the introduction of color tv, grew up in families that did not limit viewing except to perhaps until after homework was done. Many remembered television as being a tool for bringing the family together until the introduction of cable. With the introduction of cable the disagreements over what to watch ensued. Many families bought more televisions and many students reported a feeling of nostalgia for the earlier days when instead of each member of the family watching alone, the family watched together. Many expressed a kind of fear of the new television environment for children. Some wrote about the importance of the medium during times of crisis, such as the Gulf War and the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. It was pointed out that when the television schedule returns to its usual routine this is taken as a signal that it is time to return to daily life. Many students referred to the use of television in the army (or lack of it) and on trips after or before the army.

Television seems to have become less important to the students as they pursue their university studies and are developing critical attitudes towards it and distance from it. Students who do not fall into the majority category reported different experiences and memories. Kibbutz members remembered television as part of a group experience beyond the immediate family. Israeli Arabs and Druze students experienced Israeli television as outsiders, and did not think they were represented by the Israeli television. Children who lived outside of Israel or were new to the country (returnees or new immigrants) used television to help them when they did not have friends and to learn more about the unfamiliar society in which they found themselves.

Although it is hard to separate other cultural and contextual influences from the impact of television structure on subjects in Israel, some differences between the Israeli and the American autobiographies seem to suggest different influences of television with one, public channel as opposed to multi-channel, commercial television. According to Spangler (1989) children who grew up in the US, with multi-channel, commercial television seem to experience television as a context, rather than emphasizing specific programs. Israelis, that grew up with one channel, seemed to recall more specific programs and remember the experience as a more segmented one, based on specific programs.

Watching television with subtitles provided the Israelis with the challenge of learning to read quickly, but even though most of the children's television programs were educational, Israelis reported information seeking as a major reason for viewing only as adults. News was described as an important Israeli television experience, but one that was a ritual of the adults.

The Israeli autobiographies suggest that the new television environment may contribute to an erosion in the parents' ability to control their children's viewing. It might be that years of having self-censored, educational television has made parents complacent about television and not yet aware of a need for vigilance in exercising control over the amount and content of children's viewing.

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Appendix A

Critical Viewing

Dr. Amy Aidman-Kitron

Assignment #1: Personal History and Experience of and with Television

Please write a short paper, typed and double-spaced of up to 5 pages, addressing the subject of your own personal history and experience of and with television. The purpose of this assignment is to catalyze your thinking about the implications of television in your own lives as individuals and as members of society.

To help organize your thoughts on the subject, following is a list of questions which may be considered when writing your papers. Feel free to consider issues not raised by the following list.

When do you first remember seeing television? What do you remember about that experience?

What did you think and feel about your earliest experiences with television?

What role did/does television play in your home life? the television itself? the various types of programs?

What were your parents'/families attitudes about television? Were you encouraged to watch? Discouraged from watching? What were the explicit and implicit rules about television? Who controlled the television?

What were/are your favorite programs? Think about your own viewing habits as a child and how those habits may have changed over the years. Trace those changes along with your feelings and attitudes about television to the present.

Think about how television may have affected you with regard to the following:

your moods

emotional reactions to what is on the screen

daydreams or dreams

social behavior (with friends or family)

buying behavior

knowledge of the world, Israel, your own community

political outlook



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