

The effect of the “last drop”: on the question of the media’s ability to have a harmful impact on the audience

Denis V. Dunas

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Today, the media are often blamed for having a harmful influence on the moral, psychological, psychosexual, and social development of people. Indignant mothers, polemicists from politics and social fields, spiritual leaders, psychologists, and even researchers of the media attribute to the mass media truly horrific effects, such as the demoralization, perversion, and spiritual impoverishment of their audiences. The most blamed medium is television. Nowadays, television is considered to be the root of evil. The author tries to understand how justified such reproaches to the media are.

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The idea of the harmful impact of the media on the audience is based on a number of theoretical postulates. The first premise is based on the theory of mimetic processes (Aristotle, 1983); its designation is derived from the ancient Greek *mimesis*, which means similarity, reproduction, imitation. According to this theory, people have certain abilities to participate in reproducing the practices and social skills of the group that they live in and that they carefully observe; they acquire the cultural knowledge of this group through imitation. The thesis of the mimetic contagion process is the starting point of the theory of the origin of violence and other social troubles attributed to the mass media (Bandura, 1997). Laboratory experiments aimed at identifying the influence of TV scenes of violence on reality, in general, confirm this effect (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Bandura & Walters, 1963). However, there is not now a unified point of view among researchers on the nature and direction of television’s influence. Basic criticisms of laboratory experiments contain several points. First, the conclusion about the effectiveness of the imitation processes is based on the study of the behavior of people who are immersed in a specially created situation. Second, most of the experiments involve children 4 to 5 years old. At this age, humans have weakly developed abilities and skills to correctly interpret and make moral judgments (Shelina & Mitina, 2012). It is believed that these skills and abilities are finally formed closer to adulthood. And, third, the

concept of “the manifold practices of human existence” (Bourdieu, 1977) and the concept of the “active audience” (Morley, 1992) place great doubt on the effectiveness of all the experiments and focus groups. As is characteristic of all sociological research, a representative sample by gender, age, education, and incomes does not guarantee the uniformity of opinions within the group. The media audience is not a passive homogeneous mass primed to consume “ready-made” ideas along with an active group of sensible people able to make their own interpretations of the messages transmitted via the media.

The second theoretical premise regarding the harmful effects of the media is influenced by the tradition of the media-oriented approach (McQuail, 2008). According to this approach, mass communication is relatively autonomous, so the media can produce ideas, concepts, attitudes, and knowledge different from the real ones actually existing in the society. The features of media content are considered the source of social changes. However, along with this approach, another one, which is socially oriented, considers the media a mirror reflection of reality. Therefore, if you are not happy with the media, change the reality. It should be emphasized that both these approaches are equally widespread in research on the media, and it is scientifically wrong to highlight one of them as “more correct.”

The third postulate is based on the principles of “normativity” applied to the media and on ideas about “how the media should work and what is expected of it” (McQuail, 2008, p. 109). But the media’s main task is to serve the community and its needs “to be informed, educated and entertained”. In addition, the basic concepts of normative and social media theory have become an integral part of the legislation of many countries, and Russia is no exception. Thus, every formally functioning media outlet in Russia legally follows the principles of normative media theory.

Therefore, although the statement about the harmful effects of television is based on existing and widespread theories, these theories are not the only ones, and they cannot be described as absolutely correct. Researchers’ belief in the media impact on society has also varied over time. The boundless influence of the media on public opinion and behavior was discussed at the first stage of mass-media research (during the 1920s and 1930s). At the second stage (the 1940s to the 1960s), researchers, influenced by a number of empirical studies, replaced their previous belief with a more cautious attitude toward the capabilities of the media. The third (current) stage is tolerant of both research traditions.

In a general philosophical sense, the concept of media “influence” is comparable to the concept of media “power,” namely, that the media are “the fourth estate (authority).” But debates about the make-up of the fourth estate have been on-going from the emergence of this term in the 18th century in Britain up to the present time. The bases of media power are now included in other definitions, such as definitions of the “information society,” the “media society,” the “globalizing society.”

Harm to the development of adolescents can be caused not only by parents who are not able to raise their children but by a variety of other factors—for example, by an adverse political and economic situation in the country, by the involvement of adolescents in social groups of negative character, and by the lack of a good secondary and higher education. But can it be caused by television?

The very belief that television has to assume the role of a teacher of morality “passing from one generation to another inherited moral standards” (Tuchman,

1987, p. 195) contradicts the current economic state of Russian television, involved as it is in market conditions and being subject to the principle of economic profit (Vartanova, 2009). It looks a bit strange to make claims about the “moral” properties of a commercial enterprise when the society and the state have not created any conditions for the existence and development of public television, funded by other than commercial public sources. It is possible to formulate criteria for morality based on the traditional culture and the moral values of a society, but it is more complicated to define clearly the extent of the morality of individual human beings. People themselves, their thoughts and ideas must be observed during a significant period because if television causes moral harm, it will likely be revealed after a period of time rather than the day after watching a particular program. It is thus obvious that there cannot be any empirical grounds for statistical calculations of the moral harm caused by television.

In addition, the media are a rather conservative institution. Thus, Bourdieu believes that it is unlikely that television will establish any rules that are different from previous ones. Television reports present “prepared ideas” and “banalities” that are approved by the majority of population (Bourdieu, 2002). Another researcher, Cohen (1972), believes that a “condition, event, person or groups of people begin to be characterized as a threat to social values and interests and its nature is presented in a stylized manner by means of the mass media” (p. 9). So, the mass media do decide what is moral or immoral by sticking the label of deviance on certain actions. Unexpectedly, this label of deviance became an essential part of the nature of the TV reality show *Dom-2*, and this label was attached to it by the audience, not by the producers. For an inexplicable reason, *Dom-2* is criticized and accused of being “deviant” by most of the audience, regardless of their age, education, and economic status.

In general, the emergence of *Dom-2* produced, on the one hand, high ratings and a long life for the program and, on the other hand, public debates about the “correctness” of the presence of such a show on Russian screens and its ability to have an adverse impact on people. As a consequence, today, it has become one of the most prominent and significant programs in the history of Russian television.

To analyze the potential negative influence of *Dom-2* on the juvenile audience, I conducted a number of interviews. I discovered that discussions of the program are entirely typical. The dislike of *Dom-2* by the audience itself is, paradoxically, at the same time, the motivation for the audience to view it. The position of the program’s audience can be described as “I watch it because I do not like it.” Besides, “moral principles” are so deeply entrenched in the minds of the audience themselves and their beliefs connected with the TV show that even the most mundane scene of a quarrel between the heroes is perceived as immoral, when, as a matter of fact, a quarrel cannot be immoral because, from one point of view, it is a natural phenomenon in building relationships. The audience of *Dom-2* corresponds theoretically to the idea of an “active audience,” an audience that responds to what they see in an unpredictable way. The program’s forum on the Internet demonstrates that the audience’s attitude toward the heroes of *Dom-2* differs from the viewers’ attitude toward the characters of other TV reality shows—for example, *Star Factory* (a Russian version of *Star Academy*, *American Idol*). Participants in *Dom-2* are more “splashed” with the negative than are participants in any other show of this genre.

A “sober” moral evaluation of the characters on the program without the audience’s context was given by the witty anchorperson Ksenia Sobchak. Unlike her co-host, Ksenia Borodina, Sobchak was always competent and gave a quite objective moral evaluation of the program’s participants that sometimes put them in an awkward position. Thus, the anchorperson acted as an interpreter; on the one hand, “taking part in a communicative action,... she gets the same status as that of the members, whose statements she wants to understand” (Habermas, 2006, p. 43) and, on the other hand, “in order to understand what she is told about, an interpreter should possess a knowledge of wider significance” (p. 44) than the knowledge of the rest of the participants in the communicative action.

Thus, at the level of abstract philosophical reasoning, the notion that television should be moral is, no doubt, correct and inspiring. However, at the empirical level, the situation is not so clear because the image on the TV screen, as well as the content in a book, is not necessarily helpful for moral development.

The perception of participants in *Dom-2* by the audience does not give any reason to doubt the the audience’s morality. Indeed, it’s hard to find someone who would unequivocally support these participants and not criticize their actions, not see their negative sides. But it seems that the audience sees the characters of the program in a biased and only in a negative way, almost forgetting that these participants are like the vast majority of TV viewers.

The anchorperson’s reasoning connected with the exposure of the negative sides of participants’ behavior on the reality show became a certain kind of obstacle to moral harm.

From the point of view of psychiatrists, mental deficiency, hyperkinetic disorder, childhood autism, nervous anorexia, nervous bulimia, neurotic and stress-related disorders, schizophrenia, mental disorders caused by epilepsy, affective disorders, non-personalization are the basic mental disorders of young people (Sprints & Eryshev, 2008, pp. 290-316).

It is believed that these conditions are caused by the following factors:

- a congenital (inherited) predisposition
- adverse external influences: contracting a condition for which one has a predisposition, such as a traumatic brain injury; severe somatic diseases and infections; severe stress; use of psychoactive substances (drugs, alcohol)

As we can see, watching television is not one of these factors. However, in the psychiatry section of the medical manual, there is a list of perception disorders in the section “psychiatric symptoms and syndromes.” The following conditions are described there: hypersensitivity (increased perception of the brightness of colors, volume, sounds, etc.), nonrealization (a feeling of change and of exclusion from the world, its strangeness and unreality), delusions (distorted perceptions of real objects), hallucinations (perception without an object) This section also provides a list of thinking disorders—for example, the acceleration of thought (thoughts flow quickly and there are many), the slowness of thought (one thought rarely changes into another), delusions (false judgments and inferences).

Theoretically, these disorders are likely to be associated with watching television because television, as the creator of a special and symbolic reality,

influences viewers' perception and thinking; but, in practice, this influence should be identified by intently studying a person's history. In general, it is wrong to exaggerate the role of television in shaping perception disorders and juvenile ways of thinking.

In my opinion, modern society's sexuality should be considered within the context of transformations that have already occurred in this area. The phenomenon known as the "sexual revolution" was already discussed in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, and in Russia it started being discussed only in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, despite the obvious changes that have occurred in the sexuality of Russian society, an analysis of these changes has not been undertaken by the "public elite" of the society.

Here is a list of the most common changes that have already occurred (Anurin, 2004, p. 13):

- the elimination of the "double standard" of sexual morality (norms and standards for the assessment of sexual behavior are no longer determined by gender)
- the separation of sexuality from the function of reproduction
- the recognition of the right of women to possess their own sexuality and to experience sexual pleasure
- the increased transparency of sexuality
- the commercialization of sex
- the increase in tolerance of premarital sexual relations
- the increase in tolerance of nontraditional forms of sexual intercourse
- the increase in tolerance of homosexual relations
- the expansion of the diversity of sexual practices on a massive scale

Leaders of the political and cultural spheres of Russian society inertly express their dissatisfaction with these changes, thereby demonstrating their incompetence in discussing these topical and socially significant issues. The mass media do not act in the best way. They try to shock the audience and the whole society instead of conducting a public, constructive dialogue with the society. As a consequence, there are a number of claims about the negative influence of modern television and, particularly, of *Dom-2*, but the truth of these claims is disputed by any modern textbook on human sexuality.

The main criticism of *Dom-2* is the very existence of sex in it. The program's participants are blamed for being in sexual relationships despite the fact that they are adults. The "guardians of morality," as a rule, explain that they are only against sex in front of cameras. This explanation makes accusations of this kind even more ridiculous because no sexual act has ever been broadcast on the show. The viewers of the show can only guess about its existence.

A second criticism is that talking about sex can be harmful to adolescents. However, in discussing juvenile and adolescent sexuality, it should be remembered that the "norms" for adult mental health are different from those for adolescents. The concentration on sexual themes in conversations with each other is a natural and inevitable attribute of the acquisition of gender identity and of gender socialization as well. The sexologist Igor Kon writes, "Education has traditionally encouraged the

suppression of teens’ sensuality by [making] taboo bodily experiences, ‘dirty talk,’ etc. However, the discussion of taboo topics with peers helps the teenager not only to get the information that he has been denied by adults but also to understand the naturalness of his experiences” (1989, p. 211).

The third criticism of *Dom-2* is the participants’ promiscuity. From the point of view of modern sexology, it is correct to speak not about promiscuity but about a deleterious sexual addiction (Giddens, 2004, p. 91). A deleterious addiction is understood as a harmful dependence on sex, alcohol, drugs, and so on; it destroys the integrity of the mind and influences other areas of a person’s life. If there is no deleterious sexual addiction, then the existence of sexual activities cannot be regulated from the outside.

Furthermore, frequent sexual intercourse does not contradict a person’s desire to build a serious relationship, and this idea is conceptually incorporated into *Dom-2*. Thus, according to research data (Anurin, 2004, p. 24), 60% of respondents of both sexes and all ages agreed with the statement that “intimacy is, first of all, a connection of loving souls [and] not of genitals”; in other words, these respondents do not separate pure physical proximity from spiritual proximity.

The theoretical premise of recognizing the characters of reality shows and reality TV viewers as social subjects—in other words, as members of specific social groups—suggests the possibility of the process of socialization. It means that there is a commonality of beliefs, ideology, knowledge, and values among social subjects and that social subjects adopt a social experience and a system of social connections and relationships. The quality of the socialization is determined by whether it is a useful social development or a harmful one (Zinchenko, 2011; Zinchenko, Veraksa, & Leonov, 2011).

The participants in *Dom-2* are quite ordinary young people. A representative sample of participants (based on education, economic status, place of birth, and residence) is similar to the majority of Russian young people. Therefore, it is not correct to consider the participants in *Dom-2* as exceptional and especially talented, or, conversely, as people who are mentally retarded or who exhibit antisocial or deviant behavior.

The participants in the TV show are in a confined space and can relate their behavior only to the behavior of other participants in the show; as a rule, they act in accordance with already-acquired social experience. The audience, however, has the ability to carry out the process of socialization freely. This is the only qualitative difference between the audience and the participants within this context. In light of the other criteria, it is possible to say that the participants in *Dom-2* and the audience are the subjects in a common social and mental system.

The process of socialization through TV programs should be investigated only by taking into consideration the cognitive features of social subjects (Helmhout, 2006).

So, this process can be described consistently in the following way:

- Viewers watch some social representations involving the participants of television programs.
- Viewers interpret these representations—in other words, they define them as right or wrong, effective or ineffective.

- Viewers, from their point of view, gain practical knowledge and information from the situations depicted and, ultimately, use them in their lives.

Dom-2 is one of the few programs on Russian television that, instead of presenting elevated arguments about the importance and promotion of the family, actually shows these family relationships being built. And no one promised that the process would be identical to love at first sight, a prince on a white horse, death in one day, and other romantic myths. The sociologist Anthony Giddens associates the tendency to form incorrect ideas about the relationship between two people and to not consider the real difficulties in the way of family happiness with the development of the “novel” genre in the 18th century and then with the emergence of film melodrama and the TV “soap opera” (Table 1). “The greedy consumption of romantic novels and short stories was, in a certain sense, a sign of passivity. In these fantasies, an individual looked for something that he was denied in everyday life. From this point of view, the unreality of romantic stories was an expression of weakness and of an inability to come to an agreement with a frustrated self-identity in real social life” (Giddens, 2004, p. 69).

Table 1. Have You Ever Met in Life Any Examples of a Happy Marriage, and If So, Where?

Answer	Respondents (%)
In movies, books, TV programs	46
Relatives, friends, acquaintances	31
Now I have a happy marriage	29
My parents	19
Never met in my life	8

Note. A card, any number of answers, the population in general, the data as a percentage of groups (%). From FOM <http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d11zhis11.pdf>

As a result, the vast majority of young girls who want to be happily married are endlessly frustrated by the truth of life. “Sometimes, the result is years of misery given the thin connection between love as a formula for a marriage and the requirements for its future prosperity” (Giddens, 2004, p. 71). *Dom-2* partly compensates for the lack of information on television about real family life. In my opinion, the fact that the program contributes to a genuine discussion about marriage and relationships makes it possible to talk not about the social harm but about the social benefits of the program for adolescents.

Ideas about the media’s ability to have an adverse impact on the audience are based on a number of theoretical propositions. But it is hardly possible to prove the harm in practice or to calculate it and put it in the form of numerical data. *Dom-2* allows the possibility for a significant change in the typical accusations directed at the media and the possibility of discovering the main factors influencing the formation of a person, such as the social environment, the political and economic situation, and the person’s social circle, level of education, and training. Possibly, the last thing on this list is the media. Moreover, the media audience has been found to possess the ability to interpret media reports independently and adequately and to

analyze the given information as positive or negative, effective or ineffective (Asmolov & Asmolov, 2009).

Is it fair to exaggerate the media influence on a person and to define it as “harmful”? Probably not. A person is an incredibly complex unit of life, and the formation of a person involves a complex of interactions of various factors. The media may or may not be one of these factors, which have a multilevel impact. But if the media do become identified as one of these factors, it will likely have, according to the wise expression of Vartanova (2009), the effect of the “last drop.”

In the theory of self-organization the “bifurcation point” marks the critical state of a system, the point at which it becomes unstable; there is uncertainty if the state of the system is chaotic or if it moves to a new, more differentiated, and high level of order.

In the same way, people react to random signals in a situation of intensive uncertainty, and then these signals determine their choice. The whole complex of factors has a provocative impact. Thus, according to Kochenov (1977), there are several mechanisms at work in the emergence of affect, including mechanisms that are the result of the accumulation of negative emotions. In this case, the “re-leaser” of the affective state can have a slight negative impact that becomes the “last drop.”

These considerations move the question of the social responsibility of the media to a new level.

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