

Some Impractical Thoughts On Television & Nutrition Education

By Joan Gussow

I have the uneasy feeling that what I am about to say is not "practical." But I find myself in age, increasingly disinclined to continue to advance in public ideas which I have gone beyond in my private thinking. My husband sometimes quotes a line of Robert Frost: "I never dared be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old." I was — incautiously perhaps — very conservative when young only to find myself like Frost growing radical with age.

My message is very simple. Much as I would like it to be so, I am very much afraid we cannot teach children — on television — what they most need to know about food in the last fifth of the 20th century. Having said so much, I would like to tell a couple of relevant anecdotes.

I spent some time this spring as a visiting professor in Berkeley. My husband and I lived there in a lovely flat which had no television set. Friends offered us sets, but since we watched so little TV at home, we preferred not to bother. We were, of course, also cut off from easy access to the *New York Times* — a circumstance that tends to

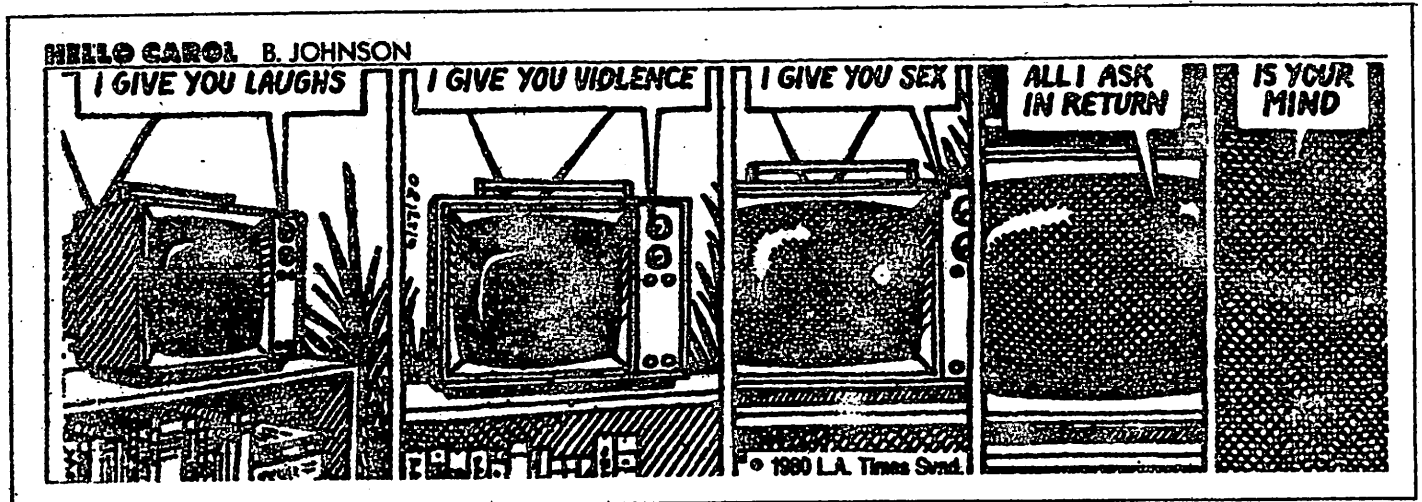
cause acute withdrawal symptoms in my husband. We did hear about the Olympics somehow — probably on the six minutes of national news one could get on the "all news" CBS radio station. (You know how it goes, "The Ayatollah Khomeini has reiterated his opposition to the release of the hostages," followed by a detailed story on a cable-car derailment.)

About three weeks into our stay, when the Olympics were over, I was lying in bed one morning listening to some overwrought sports announcer "recapping" the excitement over the U.S. Hockey team when suddenly I realized that all across the country were millions of human brains filled with a series of common images. Some of them I supposed would be images of slender women flashing about on the ice, of heavily padded men jumping up and down pummeling each other, of clots of waving, shouting, hysterical fans. The most persistent image, I imagined, must have been of a stocky figure, hunched over, legs thrusting out behind him against the ice over longer and longer daily distances.

As I lay there, I realized we had been so removed that I couldn't even remember the name of the nice young man who had won five gold medals in speed skating and was "probably the greatest athlete of all time" until the next media event

came along. And I turned to my husband — we always tried to stay in bed long enough to hear that five minutes of news on the hour — and I said "Do you realize that when they do a review of 1980 and show those little snippets of events that are supposed to evoke the elation all over again, it won't mean a thing to us? Do you realize that those Olympic images mean something to damn near everyone in the country except you and me?"

Now it happens that there is someone who has written seriously about this phenomenon. His name is Jerry Mander and his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* says that television cannot be reformed because among its other inherent problems it controls the images we carry around in our heads. I believe it is one of the important and serious books of our time; even if it is wholly "unrealistic" as I have been coldly informed, to eliminate TV, I think that fact may be more of a commentary of our relationship to our technologies than it is to the irrationality of the proposal. In this society, as Phillip Slater has pointed out, "We poke our noses out the door each day and wonder breathlessly what new disruptions technology has in store for us. We talk of technology as the servant of man. But it is a servant that now dominates the household, too



powerful to fire, upon whom everyone is helplessly dependent."

What I am saying for openers, then, is that as a result of my recent personal detoxification, I have become intensely aware of the drawing power of the universal images which some people with ratings in mind have chosen for us to live by. My husband and I hardly see television. Yet *even we* sensed the difference when we were cut off from the great communal image maker in the sky. How different are humans whose childhood images are projected on the front of a cathode ray tube from all the other humans in history who grew up having as their shared visual experiences only the blinding globe of the sun and the cooler disc of the moon and the changing sky and the rain and the look of still water and a few other objects in nature like rocks and insects and some plants and birds and animals? It scares me to realize that those commonalities through which all humans were linked to natural cycles have been so largely supplanted by technological commonalities wholly removed from authentic experience. "We resemble one another in what we see together," Camus once wrote. When the TV is left on by accident and I walk in on "The Price is Right" I tremble at the thought that these are the images that link us.

I have a second anecdote. Several years ago we had a newspaper strike in New York and found ourselves dependent upon the electronic media for information as well as pictures. One evening when I was alone in the house I went downstairs to watch the local news. Just as the picture came on, I caught the end of a story about two young men who the day before had jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge. They did it for a lark, not intending to kill themselves, apparently, but one died. The other was being interviewed in his hospital room and all I caught was one sad sentence: "We just wanted to share the experience." I was astounded by that remark, and intrigued — as an observer of this extraordinary culture — and I wanted to know more.

So I flipped to the other channels to see whether they might be carrying the same story later. All through the local news, I kept flipping from channel to channel, trying to pick up the rest of the story. But no luck. And then it struck me. I was curious, and television inevitably frustrates curiosity. You can't ask questions of a television set. You can't say "Wait a minute, I want to see that a

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bit longer." You can't say "I didn't catch the beginning of that, let's go back." (Unless you remembered *beforehand* to turn on your Betamax!) Whether what is passing in front of your eyes is good or bad, touching or brutal, you must look at it at the pace someone else has chosen and in the order someone else has decreed, complete with commercial breaks which you can only walk out on, not skip. You cannot omit the ads as you can in the paper — or start reading from the back forward as I do with the *New York Times* hoping magically to get through the paper more quickly. That the literalness replaces the imagining which books encourage has been said too often to be worth repeating. But the sense of being out of control, of having to view passively, without active curiosity, strikes me as ominous. You simply cannot control the rate or content, and if you turn it off, you have *missed* it. You cannot decide in 10 minutes that you are *now* ready to watch what you were not ready to watch before.

In short television has inherent characteristics, its tendency to fill our heads with "un-natural" communal images and its inability to let us inquire information at a "natural" pace which, I believe may make it incapable of teaching any of us what we need to know about food if we are all to survive.

Let me acknowledge that people with a Betamax can, "go back and start over," and many people hope that the pictures in our heads may have less power when we can choose them from a wider selection, when they are not necessarily shared coast to coast, and when we can, in the coming interactive cable revolution, punch our black boxes and talk back to them. But I don't think we know whether

these innovations will free us in important ways any more than we know whether or not in a time when questions get more complex, television is responsible for the drop off in people's ability to do complex problem solving. It's the fact that nobody knows that ought to scare us as we keep moving on.

Now many of us have been hopeful that we could "fix" things by using the media for positive messages. There is no question about the power of television to model good behavior as well as bad. There is no question that television can teach — so long as we are not asking it to teach "information" like "normal body temperature is 98.6°." This means that we could in theory teach nutrition on television if nutrition was understood as consisting of modeling for people appropriate behavior toward food (and perhaps sneaking in a little information on the side about why certain foods are appropriate).

My own history of involvement with nutrition public service announcements is long. Food activist Robert Choate and some others including myself once made a set of PSA's called "On Second Thought." They said, essentially, "America, you're overeating!", "You're eating too much sugar!" and "If you eat too much sugar, you'll get cavities!" They said these things with sophistication and humor and they were pretty good technically; it seems questionable whether they would have changed eating behavior even if the stations had been willing to run them. Their messages were not news. Most people who are overweight know a lot more about calories than I do. They know they're eating too much sugar and that sugar causes cavities. There's little likelihood that one more 30 or 60 second lecture — even an amusing one — will have much effect.

Since that time I have worked on various sets of short public service announcements with ABC. Some of their earlier spots were about various things kids might eat that would be more nutritious than what they were currently snacking on. Some of my students tested those, and we learned that they were probably much too fast and too information-packed for small children.

So we all got smarter. We began to realize that a major part of the problem to be solved was that most people, especially children, were eating too much and too often, as well as eating the wrong things. We weren't going to help the too-much-too-often problem by reminding

them to *eat*, even if what we were reminding them of was nutrient-packed. Such favorite "substitute" snacks as nuts and cheese, for example, are high in calories.

So we came up with some other ideas about what to say to kids: for example, "When you feel like snacking, why not do something else, like play ball" or "When you fall down and skin your knee, ask for a hug instead of a cookie." And now we have some new ones like "Don't Drown Your Food" which was based on the notion that children ought to like a variety of tastes and that since most commonly used sauces (mayonnaise, sour cream, catsup) are high in sugar, salt or fat, or all three, we would be accomplishing a nutritional good by reducing their use. And we have another spot called "Chopper" about chewing food thoroughly as a way of encouraging children to eat more high fiber, low calorie foods while giving their teeth some exercise.

Finally, I am one of those nutritionists working with American Institute for Research and Needham, Harper and Steers

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U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs



(the ad agency) on a USDA ad campaign designed to encourage healthier snacking in children. It is impossible to say at this point how widely the resultant spots will be aired. In addition, I have attempted to collect and look at most of the PSA's related to nutrition that have been around over the last few years, so I think I have a fairly good idea of the potential range of topics, approaches and strategies of PSA's designed to teach "nutrition."

I am convinced that under the right circumstances TV, including PSA's, can modify behavior. What are the right circumstances? The anti-smoking PSA's were so effective that they drove cigarette advertising off the air (ultimately with the cooperation of the tobacco companies who were losing customers). But they had two advantages nutrition PSA's don't have. First they had to be run head on with the tobacco ads. But as I understand it, the ruling that required such "equal time" has been overturned in the courts so that there is no Fairness Doctrine support for insisting that a PSA on the joys of eating raw carrots be placed next to a commercial celebrating frozen "meat and potatoes" dinners. Even ABC which has certainly tried harder must be aware that their nutrition PSA's (our nutrition PSA's) are no match for the sea of scrumptiousness in which they float.

But the more difficult problem has to do with the nature of the product. Eating is not a bad habit. Unlike smoking, eating is not something you can give up altogether. It is something you must learn to control. We are assaulted by temptations to eat — either we develop strong characters or we overconsume. Yet it is very difficult to promote thoughtful self-control on a medium which is devoted almost entirely to selling mindless self-indulgence. "In order to exist economically as we are," Jules Henry once wrote, "we must try by might and main to remain stupid." Television assists us in that effort. Self-indulgence, not self-restraint is what makes the economy go. I don't watch much TV, as I said, but I would be interested in hearing about any shows in which moderation, self-restraint, non-consumption and conservation are the characteristics of a contemporary hero figure.

As a nutritionist, I must ultimately ask myself what it is I would like children to learn about food and nutrition. Allow me to repeat what I said last year to a judge when I testified for the FTC on regulating advertising to children. "Since there is absolutely no evidence that a very young

child can self-select an adequate diet except when the possible choices are limited solely to whole, nutritious foods, a child faced with today's bewildering food supply must obviously have someone else select the foods from which the child may then determine how much she or he will eat. Therefore, as a beginning, one wants a very young child to believe mother knows best about food selection. Beyond that, we want children to believe that the foods adults eat are appropriate foods for a child, that humans eat a wide and varied selection of vegetable and animal substances and that a child need not, beyond infancy, have certain special "child foods" in order to enjoy eating. Certainly we would want children to be willing to taste and like a range of whole, unsweetened, unprocessed, unfortified, naturally-colored and naturally-flavored

foods. And finally, in this day of increasing pressure on the world food supply, we would want children to know where food comes from, how it grows, how dependent we are on the knowledge and skills of farmers. Children who do not learn these things will not know enough as adults to protect the sources of their food."

Now what is overwhelmingly clear is that television is not even attempting to teach any of the lessons I have outlined. Food advertising is, in fact, attempting to teach the exact opposite. Using authoritative male spokesmen, food commercials urge on children a selection of just-for-them products which for the most part adults could hardly be induced to eat. These products appear to be rootless, to have grown in no soil, on no farm. They are derived from no plant, except for a food processing plant which is completely remote from the child's experience. The foods come pre-wrapped, many of them in four-color boxes designed to appeal to children. Their flavors and colors are like nothing in nature, their sweetness so overwhelming as to "spoil" a child's taste for something more naturally subtle." I think it must be clear to every watcher of TV that there is very little food on "adult" television that might serve to modify these learnings.

I would like to believe that television could do something to correct these inappropriate teachings, since it would make me more optimistic. But since I believe the most important perception has to do with understanding — really understanding — the slow cycles of nature and our total dependence as humans on the continued functioning of those cycles, I am not at all sure that it can. It is the nature of the medium to separate us from real experience. And since I tend to believe with Jerry Mander that TV is not very good at dealing with such complex issues, I find myself wondering whether the best thing we can do for children's nutrition education four years from 1984 might not be to run "Crockett's Victory Garden" 24 hours a day and encourage people when they get tired of seeing it to go out and work in the soil. As I said, that may not be "realistic." But that's my message. ■

Joan Gussow is chairperson of the Nutrition Education Department of Teachers College, Columbia University. This article is adapted from remarks made earlier this year to a conference sponsored by Action for Children's Television (ACT).

Action Items

We may be several steps away from being able to implement Joan Gussow's admittedly impractical suggestion that television be abolished. In the meantime, what can you do to minimize TV's adverse effects? Several suggestions:

- 1 Watch less television.
- 2 As Gussow recommends, get out and discover the land, how food is grown, etc.
- 3 Remember that television is regulated in the public interest by the Federal Communications Commission. As a member of the viewing public, your judgement could influence whether or not a station's license is renewed by the FCC. Write to express your views about whether TV stations in your area have lived up to their responsibilities, particularly in regard to children's programming.
- 4 Join with others working to reform the content and advertising practices of children's television. For \$15 annual dues (tax deductible), you can become a member of Action for Children's Television (ACT), 46 Austin Street, Newtonville, Mass. 02160. The contribution covers a subscription to *Re:act*, the news-magazine of ACT, from which several of these suggestions are adapted.