

It is used for news programs, for nature shows, and to present dramas such as *Death of a Salesman*. It could be used to present lectures in chemistry and Plato. It helps connect us with our culture and some of its common stories. On the other hand, “viewing is almost always mildly rewarding in that it provides relaxation, distraction, and escape with minimal effort.” It gives people something to do with their time and most report they do want to watch it. With so much of our leisure time taken up with television and with so many benefits, one might mistakenly conclude that people choose to watch because it is better than anything else they could be doing. Yet the actual cumulative benefits they receive from television are rather low and often negative.

Ironically, the reported experience of people viewing television often turns out to be one of disappointment. Not only are chemistry courses not aired because few would watch them, not only do most people gravitate toward watching movies with light and escapist content rather than challenging dramas, but, just as important, half the people who watch television do not use television guides to help them decide what to watch. The stories viewers share, then, are not those shown on public television. The shows tend to support existing beliefs. As Stu Silverman told Kubey, “Television reassures us, it’s ‘nice,’ it doesn’t offend or challenge an audience. It is designed to do just the opposite of art, to reassure rather than excite. That often is what people want.” Although television does help people to relax, it does not do so any more than other activities such as reading. Moreover, it helps people relax only while watching it and not later as sports and other activities do. Although this study found that television is not a completely passive activity, it is comparatively so. It is not usually challenging, requires little mental alertness, and is reported to exact fewer skills than eating. Only idling was reported to be more passive. Unlike activities that gather and restore a person, a “passive spillover effect” tended to follow watching television, making people feel duller, more passive, and less able to concentrate. Families for which television provides a center also experience this spillover effect carried over into other family activities.

Finally, the positive benefits one receives from television tend to be enjoyed less the more one watches. Heavy viewers are not made happy by watching it; they generally feel worse than light viewers both before and after viewing. Even light viewers do not report themselves to be any happier than average while watching.

Aristotle found amusement, like sleep, to be therapeutic as long as life is oriented around exertion. So, too, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi find that those who stand to benefit most from television use and need it least. More often television is used to disburden people of problems in ways that do not go to the roots of the problems, are only marginally effective, and, hence, are entirely inappropriate. People disburden themselves of the problem of leisure time that their time-saving and labor-saving devices have created by killing time watching television. They disburden themselves of the problem of loneliness when devices leave them isolated by turning on a device, the television set. Heavy use is higher among singles. Such an answer to loneliness is only a diversion from genuine forms of social engagement. On the other hand, television is often used as a way for family members, usually fathers, to avoid talking with other family members and avoid dealing with family problems. Television resolves the problem of independently ordering one’s life, of giving shape to the day. It takes care of boredom. Heavy television viewing is likely driven by a wish to escape, to be disburdened of bad days and bad moods, of personal problems and of alienation from self. Diverting one’s attention, it tends to mask the deeper and more real problems a person is having and, hence, leaves these problems unintelligently resolved. Does it meet the task of leading a more rewarding and meaningful life? No. “Happiness is a more complex state than relaxation. It requires a more elusive set of conditions, and is therefore more difficult to obtain.” Television seems to “encourage a false sense of well-being in some people,” distracting them from and becoming an obstacle to the hard work it takes to realize one’s potentials.

More indirectly, we can ask what people are missing when they watch television. When viewers are not pleased with the amount of time they