"A Vast Wasteland" vs "A Rising Tide of Mediocrity":

Revisiting the Role of Television in Postwar American Education

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In 1961, the new chair of the Federal Communications Commission was preparing to speak to the National Association of Broadcasters, the industry group that the chair Newton Minow was now in charge of regulating. In turns, he praised and berated them for what commercial success had brought:

> When television is good, nothing -- not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers -- nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.

In particular, Minow was concerned about how this mediocrity affected children:

> [M]ost young children today spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school, and church. Today, there is a fourth great influence, and you ladies and gentlemen in this room control it.

> If parents, teachers, and ministers conducted their responsibilities by following the ratings, children would have a steady diet of ice cream, school holidays, and no Sunday school. What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children?... There are some fine children's shows, but they are drowned out in the massive doses of cartoons, violence, and more violence.

This speech is justly famous for how Minow took the argument directly to broadcasters, stating a concern shared by a number of observers. Some of these observers and critics were inside the broadcast industry, including Fred Rogers, just then finishing his run as showrunner of the weekday afternoon *Children's*

Corner at the Pittsburgh public television station, WQED. In 1961, there was *Captain Kangaroo*, *Romper Room*, and a few other children's entertainment shows that were not centered around violence or stereotypes, but no *Sesame Street*, *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, *Zoom*, or any of the other national public educational shows for children created in the following 15 years. Minow was correct in his diagnosis of overall mediocrity, especially in regards to television produced for children.

In the postwar era, the charge of mediocrity was not limited to television. In particular, public schools were regularly criticized for their lack of rigor, the way in which education did *not* challenge children or even provide a basic education for far too many. Of all of these criticisms, the most famous is the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*:

> We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people…. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves…. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.

A Nation at Risk was not the first time in the postwar era that American public schools had been accused of mediocrity. Critics from Bestor (1953) to Rickover (1963) and Silberman (1970) had been making similar arguments for decades.

In both Minow's 1961 speech and the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, mass institutions of American society were the target of criticisms for failing to meet the nation's needs. Larry Cremin would point out that broadcasting and public schooling shared more than a dyspeptic attitude by their critics. In the third volume of his grand narrative on American education, he said the two comprised the common

"educative experiences" of the twentieth century (Cremin, 1988). While he did little to push a substantive analysis from that observation, he was more coherent in his final book, *Popular Education and Its Discontents* (1990). In the second essay, Cremin connected the creation of broad, mass education, on the one hand, with criticisms of mass education as vulgar. The broad American educational experience was inherently subject to such criticisms. In a television interview with Richard Heffner, Cremin made this argument explicit about television:

> As a matter of fact the [education] fundamentalists [like Allan Bloom] believe that television has nothing to do with what schools ought to be doing. I do believe schools must engage with television, but not simply to make their peace with what goes on television, but to teach children to look at television critically and sensibly… ("Popular education and its discontents," 1990)

It is perhaps no accident that Neil Postman worked for years in a college of education; his criticisms of popular media came in parallel to the era's criticism of both K-12 and higher education as unserious and corrosive.

At first impression, we see these criticisms of television and public schools fundamentally as expressions of anxiety about American society, focused on mass American institutions because they became such a visible part of American life in the postwar era. To some extent, this is akin to Cohen's (1972) argument about moral panics, except that these expressions of anxiety had institutional targets. This is not the only interpretation of what we see as parallel expressions of anxiety. First, it is true that both television and public schools have had a great deal of mediocrity, and perhaps that deserves the bulk of attention.[1] Maybe the appearance of parallel concerns that mass institutions were mediocre is just an illusion, and that the treatment of both television and schools were fundamentally different. But if so, why were television and public school anxieties linked in the College Board commission report on the average

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[1] In contrast with the National Commission on Excellence in Education, we see inconsistent quality as a persistent feature of American schooling, both public and private. If schools were threatened by mediocrity in 1983, it was because they always had been.

SAT score decline after the mid-1960s (Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, 1977)? At the least, we think there is much to be learned from understanding why both television and K-12 public schooling attracted such criticism, and criticism that shared a common concern, that mass institutions were vulnerable to mediocrity. In understanding this common criticism, we will also understand more substantively how television was part of the "educative experience" that Cremin claimed more than 30 years ago, and in turn, how the history of education in the 20th century looks different when incorporating the history of broadcasting.

To understand how these expressions of anxiety emerged in parallel, we will discuss the potential sources of anxiety behind the criticisms, reasons why both television and public schools were the focus of those anxieties, and how we might check our interpretation by looking at different expressions of similar anxieties, both domestically and internationally. In taking this approach, we see the ordinary concerns of historians of education along with its mature historiography as sufficient to understand the educational role of broadcasting. As Herbst (1991) explained in his review of Cremin's latre oeuvre, Cremin's definition of education was fundamentally difficult to distinguish from the general culture, and deliberately ignored the institutional concerns of a good part of the historiography. We assume the opposite: while television is relevant, we can best understand the educational role of broadcasting by using and not ignoring major historiographical themes.

The Public-Anxiety Process

In the era after World War 2, the potential sources of general social concern in the United States expanded with the extended role of the United States in the world and the domestic excitements of postwar prosperity. In retrospect, one of the unique features of postwar national discourse was the growing interplay of the domestic and foreign, and that interplay touched discussion of schools and families. According to President Dwight Eisenhower, the use of stateside racial inequality as a Soviet propaganda point was a key reason to send troops into Little Rock schools--more important than the moral purpose of desegregation (Spring, 1988). Sputnik was the reason for an "emergency" national investment in public education (Davies, 2007; Urban, 2010). Both a nuclear arms race and a fertility

boom lived in the heads of those moving into suburban tract housing (Hayden, 1986). The Great

Depression was a recent memory, and war crimes trials and the political career of Dwight Eisenhower

kept the war's horrors and triumph in public view -- and the Korean and Vietnam wars made it clear that

the United States military was not invincible. Schell (1975) observed that by the 1970s, nuclear

proliferation, the Vietnam War, and Watergate had created an enduring credibility gap. Perhaps that was

only possible when there *had* been a recent era with general trust in government action, as in the federal

government's New Deal activism and the American role in victories over the German Nazis, Italian

Fascists, and imperial Japan. But the path-dependent nature of these anxieties did not erase them from

public discourse.

There are several ways to parse these public anxieties. One is to see them in competition, what

Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) described as a competitive arena for public attention, competition among the

vast universe of potential social problems. As one of us has described about the creation of the dropout

problem (Dorn, 1993, 1996), the new public acknowledgment of a social problem often requires the

resetting of public expectations. In the case of the dropout discourse, the gelling of a dropout stereotype

came with the creation of a normative expectation of high school graduation. In this framework, we might

see criticisms of television and public schooling as *competing* with other potential expressions of broader

social anxiety. What were the alternatives to criticizing television and schools, and why did television and

schools become visible targets rather than the alternatives not chosen?

Political scientists and others who research policy processes see more in the setting of a policy

agenda than just the competition for public attention. Most closely related to Hilgartner and Bosk is

Kingdon's (2011) multiple-streams framework, where policy changes come with the crossing of three

discourse streams: the definition of public problems, the advocacy of policies as solutions to (at least

some) problem, and political dynamics that favor policy change. Within the multiple-streams framework,

Hilgartner and Bosk's focus on the competition for public attention fits into the "problem stream." In

contrast with the multiple-streams framework, scholarship on the social construction of policy emphasizes

the way that policy advocates construct targets of policy intervention (e.g., Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Debates over the appropriate targets of policy then becomes a significant dynamic in public discourse. In this framework, one would look for how those who criticized television or schools chose to construct either institution as a target for the expression of public anxiety. What role did those targets play in the larger work of those advocates? How did the targets respond?

The questions coming from policy-process frameworks are highly contextual: what *current* factors shape the competition for attention and definition of who and what is a problem? But other social scientists assert a more essentialist set of dynamics in public discourse. The argument in favor of more persistent structures in public discourse is embodied by the scholarship of both George Lakoff and Jonathan Haidt. While Lakoff is a cognitive linguist, and Haidt a social psychologist, they both interpret public discourse through essentialist frameworks. Lakoff's framework is about persistent metaphors for defining public problems and solutions -- what he and colleagues have argued is deeply embedded in human psychology as permanent tropes, tropes that dominate how we discuss public affairs (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). Haidt's eternal verity is the moral valence of emotions such as disgust and loyalty (e.g., Greene & Haidt, 2002). For both Lakoff and Haidt, we are not rational creatures but irrational beings guided in our conscious thoughts by deeper structures of the psyche -- if not by inchoate urges as Freud assumed, then by language and measurable emotions. To scholars such as Lakoff and Haidt, the expressions of anxiety in the postwar era are structured in a deep sense by more fundamental psychological structures. In the case of Lakoff, perhaps it was the metaphorical palette available for discussing children and the cultural institutions that shape their lives. For Haidt, maybe it was the emotions triggered by television and schooling that connected them to public anxieties.

A more tractable framework for inchoate public judgment lies in the literature on moral panics. Associated first with Cohen's (1972) study of British public concern over youth subcultures of the 1960s, the moral panic framework sees anxious public discourse as a connection between a visible social phenomenon, a label of deviance for the phenomenon, and a public perception of threat towards a community or society. A moral panic is not so much the result of a competition or necessarily a deliberate targeting of a problem but an emergent social process. There may well be key individuals declaring that

jazz is the tool of the devil, or crime comics encourage delinquency, but the flowering of a moral panic depends on additional factors such as communication channels that can quickly spread the expressions of concern over violent video games, Dungeons & Dragons, child kidnapping, explicit music lyrics, and so forth. It is no surprise that each item in the preceding list focused on youth in the 20th century -- with a special concentration on mass-distributed media (e.g., Castillo, 2011; Gilbert, 1988). The moral panic framework would imply that criticism of television and schools had some attributes in common with moral panics in general. Many criticisms of television and public schools came from visible institutional voices: the chair of the Federal Communications Commission, a presidentially-appointed commission. But the repeating of such criticisms may have followed diffusion patterns similar to those of moral panics more broadly, and perhaps their continuation more than the original criticism is evidence of a moral panic.

Encompassed in all of this explanatory and interpretive scholarship are significant tensions. What dominates the expression of public anxieties? It might be the deliberate construction and dissemination, or it might be a reflection of broader inchoate concerns. It might focus on institutional targets, or on portions of the public. It might be the result of competition among the complete universe of potentially-visible social problems, or it might be a more emergent process for individual public anxieties. Finally, one might interpret the public anxiety discourse as the reflection of essential psychological structures such as language or affective reactions, or one might look for broader social factors that influenced the discourse. But we know the long-term postwar pattern that resolves some of these scholarly tensions. We know that at least in part, the public criticism of television and schools was constructed and focused on recognizable social institutions. Federal officials and federal commissions stimulated at least part of the criticism. At least in this regard, we can rule out a completely emergent process in the postwar era. And at least in this paper, we will not address the essentialist frameworks of Lakoff, Haidt, and others. As with many historians, we do not see these essentialist frameworks as practical tools with which to understand change, let alone contingency. To a great extent, we can focus on the questions that remain from these

frameworks: how did organized criticism of television and public schools latch onto postwar public anxieties and persist for decades?

Educative Experiences, Explained

Over multiple decades, criticism of both television and public schooling pointed to the mediocrity of these mass institutions as roots of broader social problems. What was within their role in American life that drew criticism, criticism that was the expression of public postwar anxiety? We can take Cremin's pairing of the two institutions seriously and see how far the existing historiography around public schooling can extend to the role of television in the postwar era. First, and perhaps most importantly, television and public elementary and secondary schooling served as tools for family life even as their critics argued that families were ceding authority to both television and schools. In the twentieth century, families used both schools and television to organize broad swaths of life: time, socialization, labor, and consumption. On the one hand, the twentieth century extended a long-term trajectory from the nineteenth: schooling continued to occupy more time within childhood; in the first half of the century, high school replaced the labor market as the modal occupation of teenagers when not at home. Television was a new technology in the postwar era, but it came quickly to occupy the time of children in a way that started to rival schools by the 1960s. Critically, families were not passive in this transition. In nineteenth-century cities, they pushed for the expansion of high schools when attendance of teenagers was not required by law (e.g., Labaree, 1988), and family economic strategies shaped which children withdrew from school to join the labor market -- or stayed in school longer. After World War 2, families purchased television sets, and within limited broadcast options, they chose which programs to watch, and who would watch them.

Yet the public discourse around education was not a straightforward reflection of the relationship between families and schools. Public schools continued to be the target of efforts to improve society, as they had been for more than a century. The same was becoming true for television, though it was both a new technology and fundamentally different in how it occupied children's time. As Morrow (2006) observed, in its first few years *Sesame Street* was popular not only among families but among those who hoped to reform television and make it a useful tool for social change. In some ways, the view of *Sesame*

Street as beneficent competed with other avenues for federal investment in education (Cain, 2017). Yet the motivation came out of parallel perspectives about family life: those who advocated intervention in schools or in television both sought to use the ways that families already spend time to improve social conditions. To a great extent, then, the intervention impulse was opportunistic, riding the wave of existing family choices.

This intervention impulse also came superimposed on the longstanding use of public schools as multipurpose institutions. Parents and communities truly do expect schools to be competent in addressing core academics, morality, national pride, civic habits, physical and mental health, independent decision-making, safeguarding children while household adults work, and many other issues -- and these expectations are not new. These goals have not only been in tension but are fundamentally contradictory. With education, the multiple purposes of schools have long come with deep, longstanding tensions about the relationship between public schooling and either public or private benefits, broad citizenship or social efficiency (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2004: Labaree, 1997). Television is multipurpose in a very different way: it has the capacity to entertain, inform, inspire, outrage, distract, and sell. Yet that multiplicity echoed the dilemmas of public education policy in one significant way: the postwar discourse around television reform contained an irresolvable tension. When television was designed to intervene in the development of children, should those designers focus on attracting a broad audience, or on targeting its benefits to children who desperately needed additional help? In the work of those who have studied *Sesame Street*, this tension is explicit: the show's original proposals claimed to target poor preschool children who otherwise would face significant inequalities on entering primary grades (e.g., Morrow, 2006). Yet to have that impact, it needed to survive, and survival required a mass audience. This is not the deep philosophical tension we associate with school history. But it was an irresolvable dilemma for the era before high cable penetration in households, an era when broadcasting dominated the television landscape.

A different type of contradiction came with the enacted curriculum of public schools -- and of television, if one stretches the definition of curriculum. The mass expansion of secondary education in the

20th century created a broader experience with formal public schooling, and a new set of normative expectations, and not just for individuals, as represented by concerns about dropping out since the 1960s. Those normative expectations also grew up around public schools as institutions, what Metz (1989) called the script of real school and Tyack and Cuban (1995) called the grammar of schooling. Those normative expectations were as much cultural as they were academic -- real schools have grades and bell schedules, but real high schools also play basketball and football. Those norms included some areas of academics -- reading and math in primary grades, math and English and some science and social studies in secondary grades. But the norms did not require coherence in academics, what Powell et al. (1985) called the shopping-mall high school experience. From tracking in academic classes to overloaded expectations of schools elsewhere in the curriculum, the near-universal experience of schooling in the twentieth century for an individual child became roughly a decade of life in formal schooling with a fragmented curriculum. This fragmentation was a result of how public (and often private) schools accommodated pressures as well as the managerial instincts of administrators who were drawn to differentiation in multiple ways.

Fragmentation also ruled television, even among the most publicly-minded broadcasters, if as a result of different pressures from those that shaped public elementary and secondary schools. In the 1970s, roughly the first decade of the Public Broadcasting System, public television stations broadcast programs focusing on public affairs, the arts, early childhood, some academic subjects, and shows instructing adults on various matters of interest from cooking to painting. The nationally-distributed shows produced in the 1970s by the Boston station, WGBH, included several shows that can be considered educational: *NOVA*, *Zoom*, *Rebop*, *The Victory Garden*, *This Old House*, and *The French Chef*. All were highly-regarded, most had large audiences for a number of years, and each could be very effective in teaching science, human relations and social studies (*Zoom* and *Rebop*), carpentry, or cooking. What WGBH produced in the 1970s was award-winning; coherent, it was not.

How could both schooling and television be fragmented even while there were powerful norms around schooling and national programming in television? In part, in the postwar era, both public schooling and television were experienced socially while structured systematically. This is true for almost

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all social institutions, and public schooling and television adds a multilevel component to this feature: schooling and television is experienced at the local level even if there are broader norms and more geographically expansive structures. We know this with regard to schooling. Even while the number of public school districts shrank in the twentieth century, and both states and eventually the federal government became more active in shaping or mandating features of schooling, the variation in the experiences of schooling have been a mostly invisible undercurrent in the history of education in the twentieth century. Almost everyone has attended a school, but schooling is far from a uniform experience. Despite its apparent national programming drive, even in the national broadcast era, television was also experienced locally. The commercial networks and the Public Broadcasting System distributed many shows nationally, but *Romper Room* was a children's show that was franchised, with local hosts, and many programs were created and broadcast by local television stations, available only regionally. Starting in 1968, the nationally-broadcast episodes of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* followed several earlier versions shown only in Pittsburgh or a small network of cities, and those shows followed *The Children's Corner*, produced by Rogers and mostly distributed in the Pittsburgh broadcast area.[2] Children live whole lives where they are, with important if inconsistent contact with nationally-produced and -distributed culture.

In the postwar era, then, children on average spent a greater part of each week in schools and with television, each institution under various pressures to serve multiple goals in an inherently fragmented environment, but with common expectations that each had the power to address important social problems. This alone would have been sufficient for both public schools and televisions to be the target of persistent postwar anxieties about the future of the country. But in addition to those features, both schools and television produced anxieties about *who* children were experiencing life with, not just the *what* of educative experiences. In the second half of the century, racial segregation was the dominant political question for schooling experiences: with whom did children attend school? Which peers shaped their

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[2] A weekly version of *The Children's Corner* was distributed by NBC for approximately a year -- this was a production in New York in addition to the PIttsburgh production.

growth and development, their hopes and fears? While the national discourse became diverted by debate over "busing" (Delmont, 2016), the subtext behind concerns about "neighborhoods" and "communities" was constantly about the *who* of school experiences, the proper peers for one's children and the presumed responsibilities of parents to shepherd social combinations (e.g., Cobb-Roberts et al. 2006). Even as questions of public school accountability became more visible in the waning years, it often displaced the discourse of desegregation (e.g., Baker, 2015).

Television had a different *with whom* question, focused less around race and more around an assumption about parenting responsibilities for spending more guardianship-foused time with children. During the first few postwar decades, when most households had a single television set at most, the greatest concerns about the environment of children watching television were either children watching alone, without parental guidance, or children watching adult-oriented shows, with adults neglecting their responsibilities to curate television viewing. One focus of concern was the lonely child absorbed by the screen. In the origin story about *Sesame Street* from the mid-1960s, the precipitating observation of Carnegie Corporation program officer Lloyd Morrisett was his young daughter watching the early-morning television test signal, alone (e.g., Morrow, 2006). In the following two decades, much concern (and some research) targeted mothers who used television as a putative babysitter (e.g., Gantz, 1982; Gantz & Masland, 1986; Maccoby, 1951). But an equally concerning focus was children watching with inattentive adults. As far as we can tell, no one celebrated the act of an entire family sitting down to watch television together, though it was as much a common postwar cultural experience as eating dinner together. Instead, critics such as Minow (1961) worried about what children watched while adults chose programming based on their interests, and the way that the market-driven programming of commercial networks and stations failed to address children's needs -- enough to prompt a 1972 report on the relevant research by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior.[3]

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[3] The great irony in this period is how the broadcast era of television temporarily reversed the growing age segregation of the American public (e.g., Chudacoff, 1989).

The concerns about *with whom* as well as *what* should shift our understanding of schooling and television as great educative experiences of the twentieth century. Public schools and television were both common experiences, cultural, custodial, and with complex control in the public sphere. The mass phenomenon of school attendance and television consumption obscured the broad variation in childhood experiences. The mass nature of attendance and viewing also obscured how families managed their relationship with those experiences as much as those experiences supposedly managed families. At least in the postwar era, neither public schools nor television avoided content fragmentation, and leaders of both managed their own pressures in part through fragmented and compartmentalized responses. Their critics or supporters frequently proposed that public schools or television should tackle important social issues, issues that often became legacy obligations with schools or television used to tacitly usurp the potential of other social policy. And layered on top of all this *what* came the *with whom* question, laden with assumptions about parents guarding the social and technical environment for their children. In the postwar era, both content and cohort became the cause of fraught concern.

With this background, we can now see the criticism of public schooling and television in a common framework: the accusation of mass mediocrity accompanied the institutionalization of childhood. As children spent more of their lives in school and in front of the television, both became the target of postwar public anxieties. As teenagers largely disappeared from full-time work, and as the Baby Boom began to dominate the age demographics of the country, childhood and youth became an attractive topic for moral panics and policy debates. The postwar institutionalization of childhood was not the encapsulation of childhood in a neo-Marxist sense of a way station for a reserve army of labor (e.g., Braverman, 1998), but a messy, emergent process at the intersection of demography, family dynamics, commercial technologies, and public policy. It made peer dynamics a concern within families, the building of schools an urgent task for local school boards, and the idleness of youth a focus of paranoia everywhere. It intensified persistent debates over childhood and childrearing, and it became nationalized with key Supreme Court decisions about segregation, prayer in schools, and student free speech. It facilitated a paradoxical expansion of children's rights that emerged in the postwar era, with both

protective and liberatory aims (Grossberg, 2011). And it brought attention and criticism to the institutions that had long and recently dominated the time of children. In retrospect, allegations of "a rising tide of mediocrity" and "a vast wasteland" were the signs that public schools and television were important and worthy enough for the national elite to eviscerate.

Comparative Expressions of Anxiety

Does this common framework for public schooling and television in the United States extend to other potential targets in the postwar era? In our tentative view, the features of public schooling and television that drew attention were their nature as a mass experience, their cultural content, their custodial responsibilities for childhood, their organizational situation within complex governance that intersected with the public sphere, and the cohort nature of the experience -- the *with whom* question. But how well does this hold in other contexts? In the domestic context, we look to other criticisms of youth institutions that were intense, as well as youth organizations that were relatively untouched by moral panics in the half-century after the war. In the international context, we look at the rise of global learning metrics and postwar educational television in a global context.

Domestic Comparisons

In the United States, there are three moral panics and attacks on educational institutions to examine as candidates for expressions of public anxiety in a like manner, and two institutions *not* targeted for attacks, at least in the twentieth century. The potential expressions of anxieties: pressures for public school libraries to ban books (Henry, 2001; Jenkins, 1995);[4] repeated moral panics about media and youth (Castillo, 2011; Gilbert, 1988); and witchhunts for gay and Communist teachers (e.g., Graves, 2009; Taylor, 2011).[5] The two types of institutions that were not the subject of focused criticism: youth

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[4] There is little academic literature on the history of *school* library censorship efforts. Boyer (2002) is the general survey; Geller (1984) describes the shift over the turn of the 20th century in community (public) librarian roles from custodians of virtues to defenders of reading; and Jenkins's (1995) dissertation extends that story into the postwar years, ending with the adoption of a School Library Bill of Rights in 1955. Henry (2001) surmises that school book removal efforts became more prominent in the postwar years with the expansion of libraries located in schools.

[5] As Woods (2004) explains, a substantial part of the Red Scare investigationsin the postwar era were a (not very) disguised attack on civil rights.

organizations including scouting, and religious education. This set is a first-order test of the framework we proposed: to what extent is elite or popular criticism magnetized by the postwar features that public schools and television had in common.

Public-school library censorship and media-related moral panics share two features in common with public schooling and television: they are both common experiences and cultural in nature. Media that were the targets of moral panics in the twentieth century also had the dimension of being cohort experiences--part of the public concern about crime comics, popular music, videogames, and the early Internet was not only about the content but about the shared experience of youth, the potential for contagion when children shared comics, their favorite songs, and games--and the potential for the internet to bring children in contact with adults who wanted to harm them (an extension of the stranger-danger moral panic of the 1970s). Library censorship shared the feature of public control, less as a matter of the complexity that public schools and broadcast television had but as an avenue for external pressure. Of course, the postwar hunts for gay and Communist teachers in elementary and secondary schools, and colleges, shared all of the features as they occurred largely in public education settings. What was different was the content of the criticism. Certainly, those who criticized crime comics, popular music, and videogames saw little redeeming merit in them -- though some critics such as Tipper Gore would acknowledge the recognized popularity and thus implied value of rock music on the way to criticizing the music industry. But mass mediocrity was not the focus; instead, critics in all these venues were concerned about the potential for moral corruption of children and youth as a result of exposure to everything from crime comics to gay teachers, or potential physical danger in the case of an unregulated Internet.

Missing from these intense postwar criticisms were two types of common cultural institutions for childhood and youth: Scouting, youth sports leagues, and related youth-serving organizations, on the one hand; and sites for religious education such as churches and religious schools, on the other. Neither were the targets of persistent national, public and focused criticism for most of the twentieth century. While one Louisiana priest was convicted of child sexual abuse in 1985, public discussion of priest sexual abuse of children was not widespread until a decade later (DePalma, 2002; Sipe, 1995). The most notable

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postwar criticism of youth sports leagues was about the exclusion of girls, and a New Jersey branch of the National Organization of Women sued Little League in the early 1970s for denying the right to play to Maria Pepe, and Little League opened up play to girls in 1974 (Abrams, 2012-13; Jennings, 1981). that criticism was meant to open opportunities to girls rather than criticize sports leagues for mediocrity, and it was part of a wave of 1970s victories by second-wave feminist activism.

After the second world war, youth-serving organizations and religious educational programming comprised a significant presence in children's lives and the way millions of families organized childrearing. Yet at least until the closing years of the century, they attracted neither broad public criticism nor the assumption that the public sphere was responsible for holding them to account for failings, including the now-clear failure to safeguard children that families entrusted in their care. When criticism came, it was about real, physical assaults on children by adults, or providing equal opportunities. With regard to libraries, non-television media, youth-serving organizations, and religious education -- and including right-wing hunts for gay and Communist teachrs -- the criticism concerned the physical and moral safety of children. At least in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States, television and public schooling were unique in being institutions of mass importance to childhood and youth who were roundly criticized for presumed mediocrity.

International Comparisons

In the international context, debates about comparative educational effectiveness are older than the post-World War 2 era -- in the United States, at least stretching to the pre-Civil War era. While earlier debates were generally been elite-provoked and -promoted, there are three general explanations for the habits of making international comparisons in educational policy: elite educational tourism that sometimes is a ritual of global "belongingness," world-systems culture diffusion, and the act of international comparison as the creation and operation of a "scopic system" (e.g., Addey, 2019; Sobe & Ortegón, 2009). As Sobe and Ortegón observe, each act of comparing educational systems implies a certain relationship to the broader set of systems. While the form of that relationship can vary, the comparison itself is performative for local policymaking and political purposes and both assumes and

declares the existence of or potential for "systemness" of education. In this section, we focus on the postwar era while acknowledging the longer history of international comparisons.

Global learning metrics and the construction of international education anxiety. The literature on international large-scale assessments (ILSA) in education generally identifies their beginnings in the late 1950s and early 1960s, either with a pilot 12-country assessment in 1958 by UNESCO or the First International Mathematics Study in 1964 (Braun & Singer, 2019; Fischman et al., 2019). Today, there are multiple international assessments organized by a range of agencies, with growing visibility of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The literature on the role of OECD, PISA, and other ILSA programs is remarkable for its consensus: a significant function of the expansion of ILSA is in its generation of concern about the status of and need for changing national education systems -- and by that, usually referring to elementary and secondary schooling associated with most ILSA topics (e.g., Braun & Singer, 2019; Fischman et al., 2019; Grek, 2020; Sorensen & Robertson, 2020). While there are other potential roles for international comparisons (Braun & Singer, 2019), and several with historical precedent (Sobe & Ortegón, 2009), the recent common use of international comparisons is a remarkable feature of discourse, and one that stretched across the divide between the Cold War and more recent geopolitics.

What is less clear is how the growth of this discourse might reflect a broader set of shared concerns, as we argue happened with the criticism of schools and television in the United States. For a proponent of the world-systems explanation of diffused education policy (e.g., Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992), the growth of ILSAs before and after the end of the Soviet Union might be seen as evidence of the growth of human-capital rhetoric and the triumph of neoliberal assumptions about state policy and the role of education. In this narrative, national governments have become more consistently and officially anxious about the capacity to compete economically, and put the greatest burden on education for national economic strategies. In this context, putative international agreements about Schooling for All, Millennium Development Goals, and Sustainable Development Goals carry the

rhetorical weight of human capital even when they include an emphasis on noneconomic outcomes that are important to some international actors and people around the world (see Klees, 2016; Klees & Thapliyal, 2007).

Yet even with the common expressions of concern associated with ILSAs, the modern education policy discourse has not been uniform. As Addey (2019) notes, policymakers can appear to act in consort with international norms for reasons of domestic politics, with internal national dynamics unrelated to an international education discourse. This recent history is a reminder that the development of large-scale policy behaviors in education is a messy process, and the evolution of a discourse to justify a large-scale phenomenon such as international testing may be in part an ideological byproduct as well as a contemporary argument. Having constructed a system of ILSAs, international agencies and their national partners needed uses for their data and reports. But this development of international comparisons as a prod to national ideologies of education reform appears to be a largely elite phenomenon. No matter the extent to which the elite political uses of ILSA reports in education politics is derived from national politics or international discourse, it is elite-driven, and at least at first impression disconnected from the reasons why schools and television attracted criticism in the postwar era in the United States.

Educational television in the international context. The international context for educational television did not generally focus on criticism of television as commercial or mediocre. In the following years of World War 2, the use of television was one of the main education international development strategies of key organizations including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). UNESCO believed that school instruction through television could overcome major challenges of education in developing countries: the shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of sufficient funds for education (Hawkridge & Robinson, 1982). UNESCO and its consultants agreed that building up educational television involved lower costs than constructing schools and building teacher training programs (UNESCO, 1961). USAID officials also believed that educational television could be a technological instrument to develop the educational aid programs for developing countries. Some initial

reports by USAID stressed teacher shortages as an urgent issue of education in developing countries with rapid primary and secondary school enrollment growth, growth that exceeded the capacity of many countries to train new teachers (Hornik, 1973; Masoner & Klassen, 1979).

The main purpose of the establishment of educational television was not just introducing television to teachers and students in local countries but also establishing comprehensive educational reform to advance the quality of education, and perhaps bolstering the reputation of the United States, such as in educational television projects in El Salvador and South Korea. In the perspective of USAID, educational television could provide more efficient school instruction, and also provide a symbol of modern education that could also strengthen the image of the United States in the midst of the Cold War. These cases show that the international context of developing educational television was not limited to improve the school instruction, but also to enhance a broad range of the educational system in several countries.

Our tentative conclusion is that the criticisms of public schooling and television in the United States comprise a unique composition of both dynamics and context. There were some traits in common with potential parallels, but subtle differences exist in any direction. In the United States, moral panics about mass media, school library censorship, and witchhunts for teachers all focused more on concerns about morals than mediocrity. The largest moment of youth organization criticism was around the exclusion of girls from sports and other activities as part of second-wave feminism, and religious organizations were not the targets of major national criticism until the end of the century. Internationally, the expansion of large-scale assessment is part of a global discourse about the need for school reform, but in a more varied and complicated discourse. Finally, television in the international context becomes a target of opportunity to work around the limits of formal school expansion, rather than having the same type of dynamic in the sense that happened in the United States.

Conclusion

To some extent we have operationalized twentieth-century national education discourse around agenda-setting: television and schooling are similar to the extent that they were both targeted as

problematic and mediocre mass institutions of childhood. But that framing device is a window through which we have examined how television fits into the educational history of the twentieth century. In seeing the parallel criticism of schools and television as mass mediocrity, we have discovered broader postwar parallels between schools and television, what one might call the four C's: common, cohort, custodial, and cultural experiences with complex public control. Each had fragmented curriculum (the school term) or content (for television). Each was experienced by children in an essentially local and social context even while that experience exposed them to some set of common cultural touchpoints, such that *Romper Room* and Friday-night football could be the shared experience of millions. And even in that local experience, there was the touch of the federal government, with desegregation and the emergence of a greater federal education policy structure for schools, and the licensing of broadcast stations and regulatory policy for television. In the postwar era, schooling and television were significant enough in the lives of children and families to be considered a national concern and a magnet for criticism. And moreso: they are relatively unique in both a national and international contexts; there are no identifiable social institutions for childhood and youth that attracted the same concerns in the United States, and the growing international discourse around global learning metrics appears to have its origins in elite dynamics.

We are left with a mundane and perhaps obvious conclusion: Schooling and television were the major institutions for American childhood in the half century after World War 2, and at least one significant portion of national discourse around them derives from that fact. We have come to this conclusion without inventing a new way of thinking about education, as Cremin urged. Instead, we have taken the education historiography as it exists, and applied it in a standard way to thinking about television as an *institutionalizing* experience for children and youth in the same way that schools had become by mid-century. Cremin was correct to pair television with schooling as part of the educational history of the twentieth century. Where he was incorrect was in his broad cultural interpretation of education. In *The Metropolitan Experience*, he placed television at the end of his chapter on a range of media in the sequence he thought was historically relevant: newspapers, radio, and television. That

grouping and order made sense from the perspective of a cultural historian interested in the production and consumption of culture -- Cremin's framework was closer to cultural history than educational history (Herbst, 1991). But it made less sense in the context of educational historiography, which provides us lenses through which we can useful examine the role of television.

Including television in the postwar history of education reinforces several important parts of the existing historiography that is more centered in public schooling: as we have argued here, mass education brought criticism of mediocrity and unreliability. In that regard, we agree with Cremin, and television supports the argument that education was part of a much broader war over culture in the postwar era, from historians such as Hartman (2019) and Petrzela (2015). But in addition, television shared with public schools a number of ways in which education was contested, from the role of education in solving social problems (especially inequality) to the question of who should shape the education of children and youth, including peers. Importantly, those debates became broadly national in the postwar era, even while the experiences of children, youth, families, and communities varied widely, and states continued to be the primary locus of policy. But including television should also change how we look at education in the twentieth century. Public schools comprised one of many institutions that shaped childhood and youth, and the contests and contingency involved in those institutional trajectories did not always sit in the trenches of local and state school politics. The politics of education spilled over from public schools into the politics of private education (e.g., Purdy, 2016, 2018), the politics of higher education (e.g., Hartman, 2019), and the politics of broadcasting. It is in this sense that we must frame our understanding of postwar education in the United States.

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