

No Neutral Ground

HOW MEDIA INFLUENCES US

By Aysia Tan

In our modern, technology-filled world, we are bombarded with options: watch this, read that, listen to this. Our society is saturated with media and entertainment, and the influence they have on our beliefs, thoughts, and actions is subtle but powerful. The things we allow to fill our minds end up shaping our being—we become what we think about. My graduate studies took me on an exploration of the influence of media, and the overwhelming conclusion I found is that the media we choose to consume will inevitably affect us, whether positively or negatively.

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has explained: “Technology in and of itself is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, the purposes accomplished with and through technology are the ultimate indicators of goodness or badness.”¹ Our task is not to reject technology but rather to use it in ways that will enrich our lives.

We can use the power of media to our



advantage, to better our thoughts and behaviors by:

(1) Acknowledging our susceptibility to media influence and recognizing how it influences us.

(2) Identifying and choosing positive media options.

How Does Media Affect Us?

No one is immune to media's influence. We cannot expect to indulge in media designed to affect us mentally and emotionally without its influence being sustained in our subconscious long after the movie is over, the book is closed, or the song ends. Those who believe media does not affect them are often the people who are most affected because they deny the influence and are therefore not guarded against it. Just as water will continue to seep through a leak in a boat, whether or not we acknowledge the leak, so will media continue to influence our thoughts whether or not we address its impact.

Entertainment media can influence our thoughts as we turn to it for relief from the stresses of our everyday lives. We often seek entertainment as a temporary solace from our everyday troubles, whether through movies, books, television, magazines,

or music. Although we turn to entertainment media to relax, we must not relax our standards. It is at that very time we must be cautious of what we allow into our minds.

To fully enjoy the entertainment experience, some people instinctively accept whatever messages the medium offers and therefore allow the suggested perspectives to influence their perceptions. Film critics described the use of this concept in film:

Our responsibility is not to avoid media altogether or to merely reject negative media but to choose wholesome and uplifting media.

"Truth depends on early and thoroughly convincing establishment of a strange or fantastic environment, sense of another time, or unusual characters, so that we are caught up in the film's overall spirit, mood, and

atmosphere. If the filmmaker is skillful at creating this semblance of truth, *we willingly agree to suspend our disbelief*, and we leave our skepticism and our rational faculties behind as we enter the film's imaginary world."²

If we suspend our disbelief, we tend to be more open to the values, expectations, and beliefs the media portrays. Thus, media may subtly influence our thoughts. But in this influence is the danger of accepting viewpoints that may not be in harmony with gospel principles.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles brought attention to the function of entertainment media when he said, "Did you know that the original Latin meaning of the word *amusement* is 'a diversion of the mind intended to deceive?'"³ At times, we seek diversion. We turn to media to distract us from our own real-world problems, and we depend on it to make us believe whatever it has to offer. The more believable the medium, however true or false, the more we enjoy it.

Social psychologist Karen E. Dill said: "When we are transported by the world of fiction, our attitudes and beliefs change to be more consistent with ideas and claims that take place

within the story. We suspend our disbelief and in so doing, we open ourselves up to absorbing involuntarily the belief system dramatized in the fictional world and to acting on those beliefs and ideas. Many times what we see on the screen provokes a change or a response outside our awareness. This is how the fantasy world of media shapes our realities.”⁴

By allowing media to fulfill its purpose in *amusing* us, we might replace our ordinarily rational thought processes with thoughts proposed by the media, which ultimately leads to changes in our beliefs and behaviors. Elder David B. Haight (1906–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, “As the thought is father to the deed, exposure can lead to acting out what is nurtured in the mind.”⁵

To remain in control of the media influence in our lives, it is essential that we choose uplifting media and recognize our susceptibility to the media’s influence. Media affects our thoughts and can therefore influence our actions. King Benjamin’s counsel applies to us today: “Watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds” (Mosiah 4:30).

How Do We Choose Positive Media Options?

By understanding the influence media has on our lives, we can consciously address the options before us. Our choices make all the difference in determining our sensitivity to the Spirit and the goodness around us. Every decision we make brings us closer to or further from our Father in Heaven.

Christian author C. S. Lewis wrote: “Our leisure, even our play, is a matter of serious concern. There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.”⁶

Our responsibility is not to avoid media altogether or to merely reject negative media but to actively surround ourselves with wholesome and uplifting media. Fortunately, in the vast media offerings, there is much that is good and wholesome, where traditional values are upheld and respected. There are countless books, movies, songs, and more with messages of hope and happiness, love and kindness, joy and forgiveness.

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: “Because of its sheer size, media today presents vast and sharply contrasting options. Opposite from its harmful and permissive side, media offers much that is positive and productive. . . . *Thus our biggest challenge is to choose wisely what we listen to and what we watch.*”⁷

Perhaps a television show or book series we once enjoyed has declined on the morality scale but we find it hard to give up, or perhaps a new

movie is particularly popular or enticing and we see no harm in watching



it. However, giving in just a little makes it easier to give in a little more down the road until we have given ourselves over to indulgences from which we find it difficult to bring ourselves back. But by setting standards for ourselves to allow only wholesome media into our lives, we allow ourselves to be more receptive to the Spirit.

We can follow the timeless advice that Susanna Wesley gave in 1725 to her son John, a founder of Methodism: “Would you judge the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasure, [of the innocence of malignity of actions? Take this rule.] Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off your relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind; that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.”⁸

The Power to Choose

By choosing to participate in morally uplifting media, we invite the Spirit and allow ourselves to be strengthened. The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that we are given the power to act for ourselves (see 2 Nephi 2:26). Seeking after those things which are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13) opens

our hearts and minds to adopting thoughts and attitudes that lead us to righteous behaviors. In these efforts, we will be blessed with protection against the influences of the adversary (see Helaman 5:12).

The great advances in media technology with which the Lord has blessed us come with a responsibility for us to choose how to use those technologies. Through study and experience, I have seen the impact media has, whether or not we choose to acknowledge it. Before us are the options of the morally degrading or the wholesome and uplifting. We have the choice—but more importantly, we have the power to choose. ■



The *For the Strength of Youth* booklet can also be for the strength of young adults. The section “Entertainment and Media” has some excellent guidelines for our media choices.

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. David A. Bednar, “To Sweep the Earth as with a Flood” (Brigham Young University Education Week devotional, Aug. 19, 2014), speeches.byu.edu.
2. Joe Boggs and Dennis Petrie, *The Art of Watching Films* (2004), 43; emphasis added.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Sanctify Yourselves,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 39; *Liahona*, Jan. 2001, 48.
4. Karen Dill, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing Through Media Influence* (2009), 224.
5. David B. Haight, “Personal Morality,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 70.
6. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (1967), 33.
7. M. Russell Ballard, “Let Our Voices Be Heard,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2003, 16; emphasis added.
8. *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings* (1997), 109.