Excess TV bad for Americans individually and collectively

WASHINGTON – Every so often, you may have an opinion about some issue. You know in your heart that it's so, but you rarely have the material to back up your belief – or suspicion, as the case may be.

For those who look askance at television, a study published in June by the Culture and Media Institute, "The Media Assault on American Values," confirms almost everything bad that people have ever believed about TV.

"The great majority of Americans perceive a decline in the nation's moral values," the survey said in its conclusion. "This is another way of saying Americans perceive erosion in the responsibility and integrity of their fellow citizens, sexual mores and the nation's submission before God: the very areas apparently being undermined by the media."

Note that the study conclusion didn't flat-out declare that the media is undermining moral values, just "apparently" doing so. Note further that the respondents were commenting on the laxity of "their fellow citizens," but not necessarily commenting on themselves individually.

The Culture and Media Institute conducted a telephone survey of more than 2,000 people back in March. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.2 percentage points. From there, the institute gleaned 10 "major findings" in interpreting the numbers it compiled:

– "Seventy-four percent of American believe the nation's moral values have declined over the past 20 years, and large majorities hold the media responsible for contributing to that decline."

– "Sixty-four percent of Americans agree the media are an important factor in shaping moral values in this country. Only 7 percent say the media are not important in shaping moral values."

– "Sixty-eight percent of Americans say the media have a negative impact on moral values in this country. Only 9 percent say the media impact is positive."

– "Seventy-three percent of Americans say the entertainment industry is having a negative impact on moral values in this country. Only 7 percent say the entertainment industry is having a positive impact."

– “Fifty-four percent of Americans believe the news media have a negative impact on moral values in this country. Only 11 percent say the news media have a positive impact.”
– “The more a person watches television the less likely he will be to accept responsibility for his own life and for his obligations to the people around him.”
– “The more a person watches television the less committed he is to classical virtues such as honesty, reliability and fairness.”
– “The more a person watches television, the more permissive his attitudes toward sexual issues like sex outside of marriage, abortion and homosexuality are likely to be.”
– “The more a person watches television the less likely he is to value religious principles and obedience to God.”
– “The more a person watches TV, the less likely he is to believe the media are influencing the nation’s moral values.”
It’s OK if a survey confirms our most negative judgments about TV, but it has to be acknowledged that the negative effects on society attributed to TV aren’t caused solely by TV. But the study to quantify that probably hasn’t been designed.
Speaking of surveys, it just so happened that in late July a phone call came to my house, asking for the youngest adult male in the household to take a phone survey about “the media.” Once I made it clear that I was the person in my household to fit that description, the first question asked was whether I or anybody in my household worked in the media. I answered truthfully: Yes. I do.
“Well, that’s about all the questions I have for you today,” said the interviewer.
Now, I know that it would have been wrong to lie. Still, I wanted to hear those questions and whether they were tailored to meet a predetermined bias on the part of whoever it was who paid for the survey – or the bias of the survey firm, whoever that was. Further, I would have liked to see how much coverage this survey got, and whether I would have been able to identify the survey as the one that had quizzed me.
After all, people who work in the media aren’t just producers of media, they’re consumers as well – and are entitled to their own opinions.