

# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

# What do you believe? Why?

July 23, 2009



with televisions and these modern inventions are on quite a lot. On average, there are 2.4 TV's in a typical household and, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, American youth spend 3.9 hours a day watching television (which is almost six times more time than they spend reading). At the current rate, by age 70, the average person will have spent ~8.5 years of his/her life watching TV. Thus, what gets communicated through television is terribly important in what people think and how issues are framed for the viewers.

Let's pick four big issues that are often contentious: free trade; the Iraq War; global warming; and gay marriage. Odds are that you have pretty strong feelings about each of these issues. How did you come to such convictions? Are they mutable? That is, would you consider them open to change? If not, why? If yes, then what would it take to change them? Considering the origin and permanence of one's thinking on issues can be a very instructive exercise.

I haven't done a scientific study on this, but I speculate that our views on any particular issue come down to several things, and among these are: (1) the positions held by one's family; (2) religious affiliation; (3) class upbringing; (4) race and ethnicity; (5) school system; (6) age; and, (7) the media. Which of these things has the most to do with your current spectrum of views? Consider someone you know who has a different point of view? Assuming they are otherwise reasonable people, how do you explain that they come to such a radically different position?

So, why all the questions? Any honest attempt to answer them will reveal the origins and potential misgivings of a person's point of view. For example, let's say person A firmly believes that increased taxes is a bad idea, no matter what the circumstances. This person might defend this position on the basis that individuals have the best sense as to where their money should be spent. However, when person B argues that we need to raise taxes in order to pay for our dilapidated schools, a conflict arises. Person B might defend their position by expressing the view that education is a right in a democratic society (i.e., how can we have a democracy when people don't even get an education) and as such we collectively (through taxes) must pay to make it available to everyone. Whose position is correct? Both people have a strong position, one they would defend vociferously. But is either/both correct?

I think both are valid positions, though I strongly agree with one and not the other. How can this be so? It all revolves around where these positions generate from. Likely, these individuals come from different backgrounds, from families that had different trajectories and life histories. One, the person arguing against taxes, was more likely driven by rugged individualism, and, the other person was likely focused on community and collective identity. (Obviously, I have simplified the arguments here, as one might object to taxes for many other reasons—for instance, "current taxes are regressive.") And these world views probably were driven in part by education and political and economic opportunities that the families of these people had. Yet their positions aren't completely driven by historical circumstance. Modern culture has a great impact as well.

What is the most important instrument driving our culture right now? The television, of course. Our homes are filled

What is on television? Why does it exist? The answer: it exists to sell us stuff. We know this because the advertisers pay for all the programming. Therefore, the "shows" are merely entertainment to get us to watch the commercials. And, more and more, commercial products are imbedded in the shows themselves. But only if it were as innocuous as this. From a political point of view, based on what is shown on television, here are the deep (and false, I believe) messages that we are led to believe: (1) only two political parties exist and they represent real choice for the citizens; (2) questioning/criticizing military action is unpatriotic; (3) human's overseas are less valuable than Americans; (4) everyone is beautiful and financially successful; (5) demonstrating against your government is only something that extremists do; (6) the more things or money one has, the happier one is; (7) killing people can be acceptable and even moral; (8) war is inevitable and can lead to peace; (8) people of color are more likely to do drugs and commit crime; and, (9) the U.S. is the best country in the world, period. These are powerful messages and they become the norm (when no visible alternative exists). And since children are watching so much TV, they come to take these "insights" as given. This definitely affects the way they, and their parents, think. We can't understand the way people think about issues today, without fully understanding the role that television plays in the formation of these ideas. Sut Jhally, a leading scholar on media (see website: [www.sutjhally.com](http://www.sutjhally.com)), convinced me of this in his epic documentary, *Advertising and the End of the World*.

Now back to the original questions. What do you believe and why? And, how do reasonable people come to such different positions? It is something that deserves a much closer look than I have exposed here. But when will we do this examination? Where might we find such a discussion? Will it be in our media? Probably not, at least not the "mainstream" one. Why not? Well, if it is revealed how sophisticated media outlets have become in their ability to form, promote, and entrench key beliefs in our culture, as Sut Jhally and others have clearly demonstrated, we might be more likely to turn off their messages. This is exactly the decision I came to eight years ago when I, for most intents-and-purposes, pulled the plug on my television. It was driving me to do things that weren't in keeping with my belief structures, ones that had formed through my family's history—immigrants to the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—and my understanding of race/class history. It was the best decision I've ever made. Yet I still struggle to maintain an open-mind and respect for others that think differently from me. "Life has meaning only in the struggle. Triumph or defeat is in the hands of the Gods. So let us celebrate the struggle!" according to Swami Sivananda. May we all continue to struggle.