Television is a method of communication.

It is about as revolutionary as the invention of printing.

Neither printing nor television is in itself an idea, or power, or good or bad.

They are simply methods by which ideas and experiences can be communicated faster to more people.

It is perhaps because the characteristics of television, which determine what it can best communicate, are so different from those of printing, that professional educationists were reluctant for so long to interest themselves in the newer method.

Printing and television are certainly alike in that both are costly to the producers of the communication and relatively cheap to the receiver.

They are both, therefore, mass media that depend upon reaching great numbers.

But whereas the printed word, being relatively permanent, can communicate to numbers of like minds over centuries, television is relatively ephemeral and communicates, using both pictures and words, to millions of unlike minds at the same moment in time.

Moreover, television appeals not only to those who can read but to those who can’t.

Professional educationists, accustomed to communication through words, and highly valuing reading and the quality of like minds reachable through books, saw television, in its early years, not only as a rival for attention but as an enemy of the good.

Some ten years ago a friend said to me: ‘We in Oxford may be old fashioned and fuddy-duddy, but most of us think that television is actively detrimental.’

Even that great pioneer of teaching by radio, the late Mary Somerville, had no faith in television.

“**It won’t last,**” she said to me. “**It’s a flash in the pan.**”

And many in the world of education no doubt hoped that this was true.

The situation has now altered.

It is clear that television is no flash in the pan.

So educationists all over the world are trying to get access to its ‘power’, often by attempting to use traditional methods of academic teaching to inculcate, through television, the ideas and attitudes in which they devotedly believe.

But one of the characteristics of television is that it has no power other than that created by the wish of people to watch it.

If nobody watches it, then television has no power.

Printing and television were both revolutionary when they were invented; both are relatively expensive to the producers, and both are relatively cheap to the receiver.

Television differs from printing because it is relatively ephemeral and because it appeals to those who can read as well as to those who can’t.

Educationists objected to television for two reasons: they saw it as an enemy of reading and said that it was just a ‘flash in the pan’.

The ‘situation’ referred to by the author is the attitude of educationists to television when it was invented, and it has altered because people have realized that television is no ‘flash in the pan’.

The situation has now altered, and television has come to stay.

Educationists are now trying to gain access to their power, often by trying to use traditional methods of teaching through television.

The trouble with television, however, is that it can only have power if people watch it, and if nobody watches it, then it has no power.

Although some educationists once thought that television was detrimental and had no future as a medium in education, things are now very different.

The Open University in Great Britain, for example, uses radio and television a great deal for students studying at home, and most schools, colleges, and universities use television as just one medium in their teaching.

Why?

What can television do?

Firstly, messages on television have an immediate effect because the medium uses pictures, sound, and the printed word.

It can also, of course, vary the combination of these elements (pictures and sound, sound and the printed word, etc.) so that learners are constantly fascinated by what they are watching.

It is an enjoyable medium.

It makes learning interesting and pleasurable.

Because it uses a combination of vision, sound, and print, everyone can learn from it, however well or badly they may read.

Television can bring the world into the classroom or your home in a way that geography, history, and general knowledge books never can.

And it can be particularly valuable in language studies.

Overall, therefore, when used sensibly, television can be an excellent medium in education today.