

# Turn It Off!

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The call to turn off television or even to lessen viewing hours certainly should not be interpreted as an inherently radical suggestion, since it emanates constantly from educators, parents, psychologists and others professing concern for the health and morals of the nation. Laying aside the fact that these well-meaning guardians undoubtedly are as hooked into extensive TV viewing as any other American, their pleas and advice should be seen as consistent with the continuing criticism television has experienced since its emergence as a mass medium 30 years ago.

Many, if not most, viewers will agree that “excessive” viewing is harmful activity much in the same manner that abusers of alcohol will admit to drinking too much, all the while partaking. This recognition of television’s pernicious effect could be seen in the early viewers’ dubbing of themselves as “vidiots,” and the object of their fascination as the “boob tube” and the “idiot box.” Although these phrases faded as TV and extensive viewing became the accepted norm, even today no one complains of watching too little television, only that too much time is taken up with indiscriminate viewing.

When viewers complain about television, echoing the critics of TV, they most frequently mention television’s irresistible capacity to dominate their thoughts, its hypnotic effect, how they continue watching long after their desire for entertainment has passed or how they continue viewing even when they want to stop.

## The Slang of Narcotics Addiction

With the recent announcement that the average TV viewing per household had, for the first time, exceeded the seven hour per day mark, several affluent suburbs scattered across the nation reacted to the news by instituting “ban-the-tube” groups in which cooperating families go “cold turkey”—an immediate cessation of viewing—for periods of up to a month. (One may note that it is the slang of narcotics addiction which is employed.) Still, even with all of the high hopes of the anti-tube organizers, no one seriously believes that the one month hiatus will do more than provide a momentary relief from the excessive viewing patterns which now predominate among all social strata of this culture.

(However, one should not ignore class considerations which are a factor rarely if ever mentioned in analyses of why TV is watched as much as it is. The poor, the aged [who often are represented in the first category] and the unemployed [a new growth sector] are among those who log the highest viewing time in order to fill the hours normally comprised of society’s other major compulsion—work. The middle- and upper-classes are apt to view TV somewhat less, partly due to employment, but also tend toward more selective viewing and will take time out for varied athletic, cultural or social activities not available to the other sectors.)

Still, all groups and all ages from all social classes speak distinctly of not viewing as deprivation, and a sense of real loss is expressed by those who have willfully forsaken television even for a short period of time. Artificial deprivation situations created by well-meaning parents in the “ban-the-tube” groups must seem analogous to fasting—

participants will admit to the beneficial results of not taking in solid foods for a given period, but can't wait to get back to eating.

TV viewing is no longer thought of as an entertainment—as a desire—but as a human necessity. As so often occurs within commodity society, what once never existed as a need, takes on a sharply enhanced value through the modern techniques of marketing and advertising until suddenly no one can conceive of being without the particular item.

Television has become so commonplace that to not have a set in one's home marks the non-possessor as an oddball, a crank, comparable to someone who willingly foregoes electric lights or a refrigerator. It is this social perception which sets the stage wherein the medium becomes that which communicates with Americans more than their friends, family, teachers, classmates or fellow workers. The mass act of viewing represents the shattered fragments of human communities regrouped into a pseudo-community of the spectacle—the reduction from reciprocal, face-to-face relationships which functioned within a setting of tradition and equality of participants to a situation of one-way communication directed by an elite of message senders to a mass of undifferentiated receptors.

## The Jokes of Johnny Carson

All of the foregoing is yet another public secret since the social and psychological configurations of incessant TV viewing and what they produce are well known to almost everyone since almost everyone participates. A massive and pervasive culture has evolved around both television's less obvious feature, its form (more on this below), and its glaringly obvious content. In terms of the latter, almost the entire population over the age of two years is hooked into some segment of the "viewing day" and exhibits an intricate knowledge and a deeply felt affection for the characters of Sesame Street, through to the afternoon soaps, evening sitcoms, and ending with the jokes of Johnny Carson.

This personal involvement with fantasy characters (a trait once only expressed by children) has recently taken on an even more quirky quality as characters from commercials have arisen as objects of alienated affection (the "Where's the beef?" phenomenon). To be separate from all of this—to not know the latest machinations occurring in "Dynasty" (a weekly soap where mean rich people are featured) or to not know how "we" did in "the game" last night is to virtually stand alone from one's fellow workers, family, classmates and neighbors.

Jerry Mander, in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, describes what is produced within a culture whose population sits glued to TV sets passively absorbing images of what was once part of a directly lived human experience. This "mediation of experience"—Mander's apt phrase—comes as the modern epoch walls us off totally from the natural functioning of the planet and we are left to "experience" much of our world through the unified, centralized messages sent from our televisions.

Its power as a medium comes through its ability to transmit images, which no matter how arbitrary, are without reference points and contain the ability to define reality. This translates not just into the simplistic concept of power for a discernible ruling class (although it does do that), but describes, as well, an entire mode of living that maintains domination within it no matter who rules or even if there are no rulers at all.

In George Orwell's oft-cited 1984, the Party enforced its tyrannical regime through utilizing omnipresent screens by which the citizenry was scrutinized for signs of deviation. However, in the present world the situation is reversed: people passionately watch the rulers' messages and willingly accept the same type of twists and turns in politics, morals, consumer attitudes, etc. which the Party in the novel had to go to great lengths to enforce. 125,000,000 people all sitting in darkened rooms, all receiving the same message at the same time is something a dictator of yore could have scarcely dreamed of.

## The Creation of Images and Impressions

This colonization of experience—the creation of images and impressions of the world which meet the corporate needs of consumption and the political needs of passivity—is inherent not just in the direct social cues contained in television’s content but even in its physical presence. The very existence of a set within one’s house expresses an acquiescence to power—the TV is “His Master’s Voice”—and even before it is turned on, mere possession gives evidence of the owner’s willingness to submit.

I think the assumption can be safely made that the majority of people reading this newspaper are among the many who feel at least a discomfort if not a hatred toward this society and have dreams of its alteration or destruction/replacement. Yet many of this same group maintain viewing patterns not dissimilar to those who feel at ease with the present state of affairs. It is foolish of us to contend that simply because we are infused with a desire for freedom and a critique of technology that we can remain impervious to television’s reactionary content, its inherent biases or its peculiar physical properties.

Every message beamed to our brains through the 25,000 volt cathode ray tube behind the shimmering, 300,000 dots which comprise the viewing screen are ones which make our vision of a new world that much more diminished. TV creates a totalized psychological environment for its viewers where the commodity reigns supreme and the tyranny of the fact announces that this is all there is, this is whatever can be and whatever will be. The absorption of images laden with dominant social cues is irresistible, whether contained within the 30,000 to 40,000 commercials a year the average American will view, or in the programming itself. The argument that one’s intellect or radical values can distinguish between so-called “neutral information” and what the rulers wish placed in our heads fails to appreciate the function of both the brain and the machine.

The brain of a rebel soaks up the social cues contained in television images in a physical manner no less so than the model citizen who is longing for the messages. The images we despise, as well as ones we may find pleasant, reassuring, informative or entertaining, pass through our brains with equal power.

As Mander puts it, “Once they are in your mind and stored, all images are equally valid. They are real whether they are toothpaste, Walter Cronkite, Kojak, President Carter...a Ford Cougar, a cougar...Once inside your head, they all become images that you continue to carry in memory. They become equally real and equally not real...(The images) remain permanently. We cannot tell, for sure, which images are ours and which came from distant places. Imagination and reality have merged. We have lost control of our images. We have lost control of our minds.”

Television’s role in the drive toward acceptance of a totally centralized, unification of thought gains much of its impetus from the inability of humans to live comfortably in exile—the ultimate punishment in many tribal societies who knew such censure was at the same time worse than, and the same as, death. Rebels who watch television experience an exile of sorts every minute they are viewing. Each message tells them: you are outside, you think differently, you dress, smell, look and act differently. Come, join all the happy, smiling faces at the supermarket, in the bathroom, in the cars, in the bars—don’t be out there alone. To be so is to suffer the fate of the Savage in Huxley’s *Brave New World*—sanity in an insane world is always stood on its head.

## The Power of the Television Culture

The impulse to view comes from differing psychological sources within one’s personality, the most obvious no doubt being that TV is a source of easy entertainment or pre-occupation for one’s imagination. However, this seemingly uncomplicated desire is part of the process which further chokes off self-motivated autonomous activity as mundane as reading, gardening, sports, visiting, or self-entertainment and strengthens the power of the television culture. The turning on of the television as the first act upon arising or entering the home is a socially synchronized one that sets in motion one modality while excluding all others. All of what humanity once did since its inception to entertain itself around campfire, hearth or parlor comes to appear as “old-fashioned,” or boring. It is only TV’s constant dizzying pace which holds out the promise of entertainment once the old skills and joys are relinquished. There is something less compelling about an evening of folk singing with friends and neighbors than witnessing several of the 18,000 murders a child is treated to between the ages of six and eighteen.

TV's riotous, meaningless jumble of sights and sounds mirrors exactly the manic, compulsive obsessional quality of the wage labor which produces it. Those who see television viewing as a way to wind down or relax after a day on the job miss both the characteristics of work and TV. Through television, your mind does escape the obsessive thought patterns of your particular employment, but it is then quickly filled with the obsessive thought and images of someone else's job—those who create television. TV carries with it the paradigm of this culture—inconstant consumption—with the mind rarely at rest, free of externally induced thoughts.

## **Cues for Behavior and Response**

The viewing I've done in recent years has almost exclusively been centered around news shows which I hoped would add a visual dimension to the reported events of the day. But even this sort of "discriminating" viewing is problematic. Upon reflection it occurs to me that very little if anything was provided to my knowledge of the world through the selected clips chosen for broadcast. David Altheide in "Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events" writes that "...the organizational, practical and other mundane features of news work promote a way of looking at events which fundamentally distorts them..." Looking back I would say that I have learned the most about events from newspapers and magazines, some from radio and the least from television sources.

TV is best at transmitting images as cues for behavior and response and it is a mistake of the first magnitude to assume that the most sophisticated medium is at once the one most capable of imparting accurate information.

A personal example may serve to make my point: Last Fall, I eagerly watched much of television's coverage of the U.S. invasion of Grenada, often through to the bitter end of ABC's "Nightline" show, and found myself going to sleep each night depressed and despairing. Besides repeating every lie of the government uncritically, the medium itself oozed the even more insidious message, which was that everyone agreed with the invasion, and the proof was that it was being broadcast to millions uncritically. As circular as this reasoning may seem, it is TV's mass dimensions and the pseudo-immediacy of its counterfeit reality which nullify our own sense of reality. In effect, I was told nightly that I was an insignificant fragment who opposed what the vast approving masses had signaled their assent to.

Once away from the television, things appeared different. Detroit is a liberal, predominantly black city where the city administration and several U.S. Congressional Representatives had been sympathetic to the Bishop regime, and I circulate in a milieu where I met virtually no one who supported the American military action. Also, I attended several large anti-intervention rallies which served to buoy my spirits about the prospect of opposition to Reagan's policies. However, when I returned to TV at night, the feeling of isolation also returned, which is precisely the emotion TV is best at producing.

The *Fifth Estate* described the same process when Iran was holding U.S. embassy spies hostage several years ago (see FE March 18, 1981). In an article entitled, "What A Day It Wasn't," we stated, "...only the oddballs and cranks (stood) outside of the patriotic consensus and were unmoved either through disgust or apathy (and) were never presented coherently or as having any significant dimension. This meant that dissenters from the approved ideas, no matter what their total numbers, could only view themselves as one person pitted against a mass, coherent, socially sanctioned body of public opinion." It is ultimately this process which is TV's central function—our fragmentation and massified re-groupment—and even the realization of this is not in itself a defense against its power.

## **Shut It Off and Get Rid of It**

We should shut it off and get rid of our TV's for both the symbolic nature of the act—not having a set states eloquently that you are unwilling to permit liars in your home—and because of the actual damage it does to our minds. Television has moved to the foreground to join wage labor as the mighty discipliner of this society. Most other pillars of this culture cannot be avoided—work, commodity consumption, etc.—but in this case we are given the easy option of turning off their lies.

(This article barely scratches the surface of TV's impact on our lives. I would highly recommend Jerry Mander's book mentioned in this article and listed on our Bookstore page for a more complete understanding of the subject. Many aspects raised but not covered adequately within this article such as prospects for decentralized cable TV, the mediation inherent in other forms of "communication"—radio, films, even newspapers—will be covered next issue. Until then, we welcome your responses, ideas and visions.)

# **fifth Estate**

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