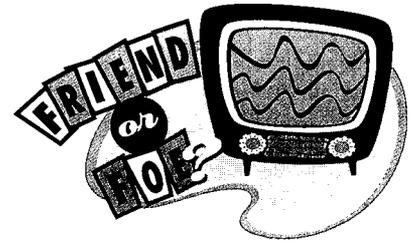


America Unplugged



By Matthew Stevenson

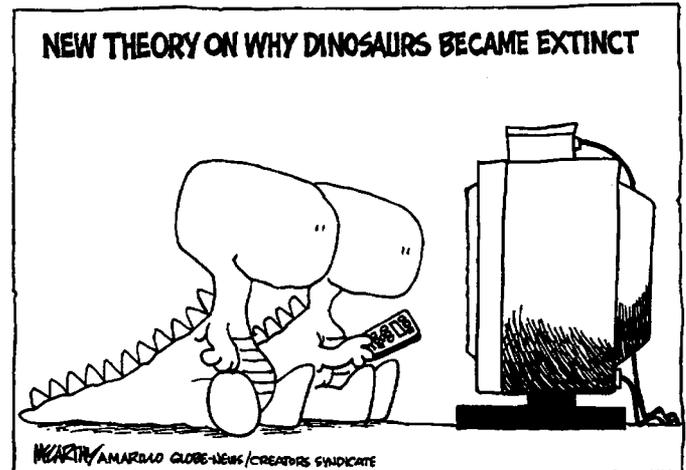
Growing up on Long Island, I watched my share of murders and sit-coms, as well as space shots and political assassinations. I always thought Maxwell Smart had a better grip on the Cold War than did Henry Kissinger. Everything I needed to know about Hollywood I learned from Jed Clampitt.

At college in the 1970s, the appeal of television began to fade as if a shoebox of old baseball cards. In the '80s, I found myself estranged from the fusion of television and politics. I imagined the White House partitioned into stage sets, as government-by-story-board became hard to distinguish from the plots on daytime television. The sound-bite campaigns held no more interest than Home Shopping. In the early '90s, before C-SPAN had a following or the Sunday press shows had redefined themselves as Irish bars, I moved from New York to the Swiss countryside just outside Geneva. At the same time, my wife and I gave up TV, and thus, like pioneers in the nineteenth century, we connect to America only through mail and the columns of the daily newspaper. My up-link to the U.S. is hotel television.

Few things, however, are more discouraging than to fly to a remote part of the globe, check into a hotel with ceiling fans, and then find the company of cable Americans beamed up on several channels. Even in Russia or on certain Pacific islands, I have been awake at odd hours watching real stories of the highway patrol or reruns of "Baywatch."

At these jet-lagged moments, lying on a great mattress, my head propped on extra pillows, I feel like Huck Finn adrift on a raft in the eddies of American culture. In Bryant Gumbel or Peter Jennings, all I see are Mark Twain's king and duke playing the Royal Nonesuch along the banks of the Mississippi.

On these dark nights of the soul, I often wonder if, after an evening of television, Alexis de Tocqueville would again want to observe the American experiment. Would he stir from his native Normandy to make notes about a country that is spell-bound by "Hard Copy" or "Live with Regis and Kathie Lee"? Or would he take comfort that he had already written: "I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly cir-



cling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest."

When my friend Bill Rodgers got rid of television in 1968, he tossed his into a lilac bush—giving the episode some biblical fire and brimstone. When we moved to Switzerland, we brought with us a VCR and a small black-and-white TV, the kind doormen watch in the lobbies of rundown apartment buildings. We talked about converting to Swiss television, perhaps even color. But it was summer, there were Alps to explore and local wines to taste, and Swiss TV on Saturday evenings features men in lederhosen playing the accordion to women in dirndls.

More to the point, our daughters, then four and two, were reaching an age that required explanations for prime-time rub-outs or the civil war in Yugoslavia. So we followed the advice of the Oompa-Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*:

The most important thing we've learned,
So far as children are concerned,
Is never, never, never let
Them near your television set—
Or better still, just don't install,
The idiotic thing at all.
In almost every house we've been,
We've watched them gaping at the screen,
They loll and slop and lounge about,
And stare until their eyes pop out....

So please, oh please we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall.

In place of TV, the children (now there are four) created a series of imaginary worlds that can be conjured up as quickly as the changing of a channel. Old boxes are rafts that cross oceans. Sofa cushions are dogsleds speeding serum from Anchorage to Nome. As Robert Louis Stevenson wrote:

We built a ship upon the stairs
All made of the back-bedroom chairs,
And filled it full of sofa pillows
To go a-sailing on the billows.

In the evenings we read them stories and, after we surrender, they listen to books on tape. Over the years I have assembled, for the cost of a cable subscription, an extensive collection of full-length recordings, including *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Robin Hood*. The tapes link the children to the oral traditions of storytelling that started with Homer and continued in children's lives until TV muscled fireside radio out of the living room.

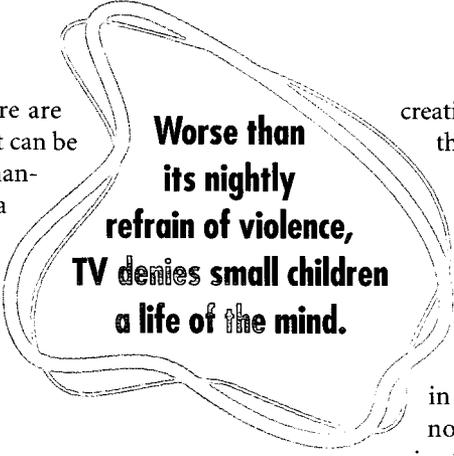
Since giving up television, I find myself drawn to others who do without it, as if part of a smug club that has blackballed Conan O'Brien. I also spend a lot of time reading about the harmful effect that TV has on children. These books recite the litany of gloomy statistics. By age 18, most American children will have seen 17,000 televised murders and watched television for 20,000 hours, during which time they will have only spent 11,000 hours in a classroom. Last year, according to one survey, prime-time television had 65,000 sexual references. The average American preschooler watches 27 hours of television a week. In most households, the TV is on more than five hours a day.

Worse than its nightly refrain of violence, television denies small children a life of the mind. With bedtime stories and make-believe, kids dwell in their imaginary worlds. They visit hospitals, fly airplanes, or confront dragons under the bed. Only through these fantasies can they try out future character or come to terms with their fears—what Bruno Bettelheim eloquently called, “the uses of enchantment.”

By developing these imaginative worlds children can start to become happy in their own company—to rely on themselves, not Disney, to fill long afternoons. But TV makes it difficult for children to dream. Neither cartoons nor even “Sesame Street” require imagination. “Watching television not only requires no skills but develops no skills,” as one educator put it.

From a life of TV, children expect only to be entertained. I have heard schoolteachers complain that students sit at their desks with the same expectations they have when watching “Saturday Night Live.” But the absence of “something to do” is important in a child's development. As Jerry Mander writes in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*: “Looking back, I view that time of boredom, of ‘nothing to do,’ as the pit out of which

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creative action springs.... Nowadays, however, at the onset of that uncomfortable feeling, kids usually reach for the TV switch.”

Not only does television foster dependence on the entertainment world, it also ends the distinctions between children and adults, both of whom simultaneously digest the same disconcerting images of O.J. Simpson, the war in Somalia, or the ritual infidelities of afternoon talk shows. As Neil Postman observes in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, “The

world of the known and the not-yet-known is bridged by wonderment. But wonderment happens largely in a situation where the child's world is separate from the adult world, where children must enter, through their questions, into the adult world. As media merge the two worlds, he adds, “the calculus of wonderment changes. Curiosity is replaced by cynicism or, even worse, by arrogance. We are left with children who rely not on authoritative adults but news from nowhere.... We are left, in short, without children.”

Some of these adult-children in the big cities imitate their TV heroes by using a gun to settle an argument. I remember one interview with a child who killed a robbery victim in New York. He confessed that he had no idea guns actually killed people. He had seen many deaths on TV, but none of them had seemed real. After pulling the trigger, he had expected his victim to get up and be on his way, delayed only by a quick game of cops and robbers.

Another reason I do not want my children watching television is that I do not like how it projects the image of war. War may be a tragic element of the human condition, but unless adults interpret for children a land mine in Angola or a bomb in Jerusalem, such incidents become either another action drama in television's wonderland, no more real than Superman, or as dreadfully immediate as the shadows on the bedroom wall.

“War makes no national or racial or ideological distinctions as it degrades human beings” is a lesson the writer John Hersey learned on Guadalcanal during World War II—where our children's grandfather had a similar education. But during the Gulf War in 1991, the television coverage of the fighting was delivered in tones of breathless excitement normally reserved for a Super Bowl. The allied air attack against Baghdad, with Peter Arnett down on the sidelines, lacked only a half-time show, and the slaughter of an army of frightened recruits touched off a national celebration as if Iraq had lost to Ohio State in the Rose Bowl.

Whether democracy can survive an electorate that watches five hours of television a day is an open question. Who can understand the complexities of Bosnia or the wealth of nations based on 22 minutes with Connie Chung? Would the minds of Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, or F. Scott Fitzgerald have emerged from endless evenings with the Huxtables?

On the surface, nothing could be more democratic than a medium that projects the image of political leaders to 98 percent of the population. With interactive television, America could become a nation of parliamentarians, with

citizens answering every roll call. But those judging either Messrs. Clinton or Gingrich are an audience, there to be entertained, not an electorate that is part of the debate. The Burbank studio is no more heir to the Greek *polis* than Tom Brokaw is Demosthenes.

For this reason, I expect TV to become a well-developed medium for show trials, since so many preconditions are present: an audience that needs ever more lurid tales to be entertained, the absence of history, and the popularity of judges second only to that of private detectives. Perhaps Time Warner can launch the Show Trial Station and each week have Wolf Blitzer introduce the victim and the crime for which he has already been condemned.

Television's threat to democracy lies also in its monarchist pretensions. Celebrities are the kings while ideas live like monks in cold abbeys. Viewers are serfs, raking small patches of earth allotted them by Cablevision or Home Box Office. Audiences grovel before such court jesters as Jay Leno or Johnny Carson, who would be better understood if required by the Federal Communications Commission to wear Shakespearean tunics. Televised presidential addresses, however well-intentioned, are all variations on the balcony scene in *Evita*.

Not only is the nostalgia of most television a rebellion against the future, its sense of history thinks nothing of rewriting the past. Only someone with the narrative sense of Franz Kafka could imagine the context in which most programs are set or the suspension of disbelief they require: FBI agents tracking aliens, happy people on bar stools, newspaper editors like Lou Grant. Thirty years later, I am still amazed that television

could have broadcast a comedy about amusing Nazi prison guards. As Kafka wrote of another sit-com: "It turns lying into a universal principle."

Television was set up to sell things, not to inform. Its affiliations are to the advertising industry, not the public library, and thus it measures its success by the amount of soap sold, not the number of spirits cleansed. Nor do I believe that with the expanding cable and satellite revolution the abundance of channels will produce a higher level of programming. For every C-SPAN or A&E, there are ten other channels preaching the spiritual value of time-sharing or showing reruns of "The A-Team." As Bruce Springsteen observed, "55 channels and nothing on."

Alas, I no more expect America to give up TV than I expect some day to visit Lake Wobegon and have lunch at the Chatterbox Cafe—attractive as both ideas might be. I do think, however, that young families, when it comes time to childproof the house, should remove television's live wire. Why protect children from Drano but not "The X Files"? From the experience of friends, even those who deplore TV, I know that for many people giving up the tube requires too great an act of penitence—as if it meant a move to an ashram or a cabin like that of the Unabomber.

Nevertheless, pulling the plug on television is a simple act of independence that requires neither a resolution of Congress nor an environmental impact statement. The cord comes easily away from the wall, and in exchange, the average family will pick up lazy afternoons and quiet evenings for the pursuit of happiness.



TV, KIDS, AND VIOLENCE

In 1973, a remote rural community in Canada (dubbed "Notel") acquired television for the first time. Researchers observed 45 first- and second-graders there and in two similar towns that already had TV and compared rates of inappropriate physical aggression before television was introduced into Notel. Two years later, the same 45 children were observed again. Rates of aggression did not change in the two control communities. By contrast, the rate of aggression among Notel children increased 160 percent. The increase was observed in both boys and girls, in those who were aggressive to begin with and in those who were not.

Another Canadian study investigated the impact of television upon Indian communities in northern Manitoba. Forty-nine boys living in two communities were observed from 1973, when one town acquired TV, until 1977, when the second town did as well. The aggressiveness of boys in the first community increased after the introduction of television. The aggressiveness of boys in the second community remained the same. When TV was later introduced in the second community, aggressiveness increased there.

U.S. and Canadian studies of prolonged childhood exposure to television demonstrate a positive relationship between exposure and physical aggression. The critical period is preadolescent childhood.

White South Africans have lived in a prosperous, industrialized society for decades but did not get TV until 1975 because of tension between the Afrikaner- and English-speaking communities. I compared homicide rates in South Africa, Canada, and

the United States. From 1945-74, the white homicide rate in the United States increased 93 percent. In Canada, the homicide rate increased 92 percent. In South Africa, where TV was banned, the white homicide rate declined by 7 percent.

Could there be some explanation other than television for the fact that violence increased dramatically in the U.S. and Canada while dropping in South Africa?

Economic growth: Between 1946 and 1974, all three countries experienced substantial economic growth. Per capita income increased by 75 percent in the United States, 124 percent in Canada, and 86 percent in South Africa.

Civil unrest: One might suspect that anti-war or civil-rights activity was responsible for the doubling of the homicide rate in the U.S. But the experience of Canada shows that this was not the case, since Canadians suffered a doubling of the homicide rate without similar civil unrest.

In the United States and Canada, there was a lag of ten to 15 years between the introduction of television and a doubling of the homicide rate. In South Africa, there was a similar lag. Since TV exerts its behavior-modifying effects primarily on children, while homicide is primarily an adult activity, this lag represents the time needed for the "television generation" to come of age.

Many factors other than television influence the amount of violent crime. Nevertheless, if, hypothetically, TV had never developed, violent crime would be half what it is.

—excerpted from Brandon S. Centerwall, "Television and Violent Crime," *The Public Interest*, Spring 1993.

TV-Free



Real families describe life without the tube

By Karl Zinsmeister

Does the idea of killing your TV—getting the box completely out of your house—seem unfathomable? Well, two million American households, most of them families with children, have done exactly that. To many of their neighbors, these citizens may be the ultimate oddity.

Who are the TV-free? How do they live? To give our readers a clearer picture, we conducted interviews with more than two dozen parents currently raising children without TV, plus some of the kids. (*TAE* intern Kristin Moorefield did much of the heavy lifting of conducting and transcribing the interviews.) These families vary widely in makeup, place of residence, occupation, and political preference, but there are striking common themes in their experiences with television.

Perhaps the finding that will surprise readers most is the unanimous verdict of our interviewees that getting their kids (and the family adults) to give up TV was unexpectedly easy. "To our surprise," reports Southern California mother Penny Parish, "the children don't seem to mind that much. They read a lot instead! Our 16-year-old recently was asked

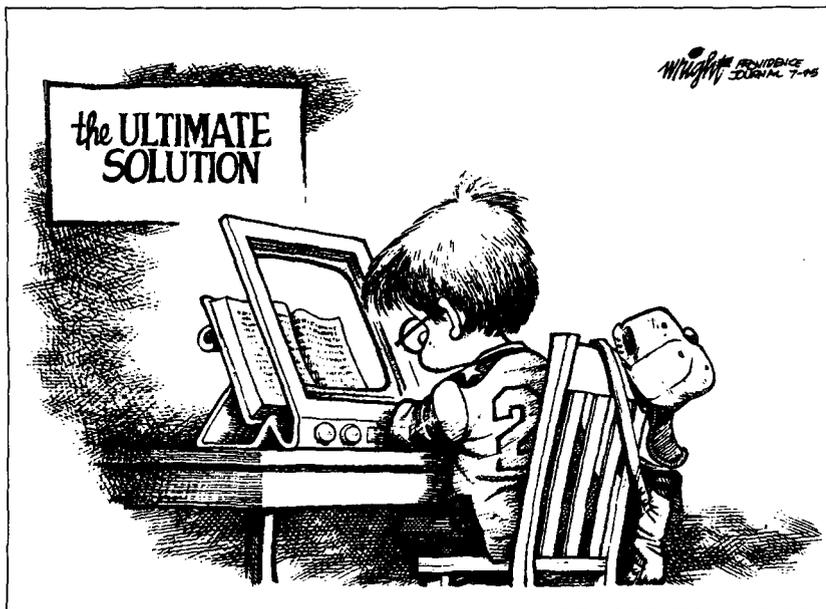
by our local library to work part-time because she knows the library so well."

Just as unanimously, however, our interviewees tell us that reactions from relations, friends, and neighbors have often been incredulous, defensive, and critical. "My relatives think this is going to backfire on me someday, that my kids are going to grow up to be TVholics," says Texas mother Cornelia Odom, adding that "one close relative asked how we expected our daughter to learn her letters and numbers, and how to read, if she didn't watch 'Sesame Street.'" "Our friend T.T. said it was unnatural not to have a TV, and that we were depriving our children," relates Montana auto mechanic Hendrik Mills. "One relative thinks we're a little kooky," a mother named Irene Komor informed *TAE*. "When you first tell people, they think you must be a member of some weird religious sect," agrees Dana Mack.

An indication of the disbelief that follows the decision to go TV-free is the fact that literally a majority of the parents we talked to had had a relative actually give them, or try to give them, a TV—on the assumption that the family didn't really want to go without, but perhaps couldn't afford one, or didn't realize how much they'd like it if they'd just try. (This has happened to your TV-less editor twice.)

Several interviewees said they suspect hostile reactions to the decision to unplug often grow out of the critic's guilt over his own TV habits. In their bones, most Americans now believe that heavy TV-watching is taking a toll on the nation—and in particular that children and television aren't a good mix. When Americans were asked by Gallup back in 1962 whether they considered TV a good or bad influence on kids, twice as many answered "good" as "bad." Today, "bad" has pulled ahead of "good." And twice as many respondents say TV is getting worse as say it is getting better.

A tottering accumulation of studies documents TV's noisome content. The Kaiser Founda-



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