

Get Rid of the Tube and Gain a Life

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People sometimes ask why I, a professor of communication, do not have a television in my home. When I try to explain, the usual response is something like: "I admire that decision, but I don't think it would work for me."

Television presents a dilemma: Many of us find that it does not represent a productive or enriching use of time, but we nevertheless find it attractive as a source of entertainment and information.

So, how can a thoroughly modern American get rid of the tube without committing cultural and maybe even intellectual suicide?

I think eliminating television from one's life can be a perfectly reasonable decision. Here are some of my reasons for taking the cultural path less traveled.

First, I object to the system that drives television. Commercial television in America today must be understood, not principally as a medium for delivering entertainment and information, but as an enormous industry centered on garnering viewers of commercials.

Entertainment and information are bait in television's great fishing expedition for audiences. And television seeks audiences for only one reason -- to sell those audiences to advertisers. Commercials are the point of commercial television, and programming is a means of securing attention to those commercials.

When I watch television, I am investing uncompensated time (unless the programs are my compensation) as a "commercials viewer" and my time is being sold to an advertiser by a network. No thanks. I've got better things to do.

Second, television viewing is a gigantic waste of time. The typical American family has the television on for five or six hours each day, and in many households it's on considerably more time than that.

The only other activities to which most of us devote that much time are work and sleep. In other words, about the only time we have to ourselves, time we can do with as we please, many of us choose to spend watching television.

Our reward for that investment of time is a meager one -- a heavily edited view of world events through "news" programming and the shallow comedies and tragedies of prime time. Given the choice, I would rather spend that time reading, taking a walk, talking with a friend. Which brings me to my third point.

Television robs relationships of time. Relationships among friends and family members take time to develop -- quantity time.

Marriages, for example, are nurtured on communication, and this communication takes time -- lots of time, regular time. Television steals the time it takes to build and enjoy relationships, which are to my mind a lot more satisfying than sitcoms.

Doesn't time spent watching television together build relationships? Frankly, no. Television does not usually encourage communication, either while people are watching it or afterwards. I am an advocate of conversation, and thus an opponent of television.

Fourth, let's face it: Television programming is frequently vacuous, noxious or both. Need I elaborate?

Does television programming typically set a high standard for personal conduct? Does it ask me to think hard about what I ought to value, and why? Does it provide insights into the intricate issues that face any citizen of this increasingly complex and diverse society?

Even at its best, television seldom does any of these things. And even when it inadvertently does accomplish a worthwhile goal, there are any number of surer paths to these ends. Most of us need more, not less, incentive to live humanely, think broadly, and engage relationships empathetically.

My final reason for turning off the tube is that involvement with it is often based on an unexamined concept of entertainment. Television is usually justified as a means of entertaining ourselves, of relaxing from the demands of work.

But many of us have accepted uncritically the Hollywood notion of entertainment as "amusement without boundaries," whether those boundaries are of time or subject matter.

I am not arguing against the fatigued duo of sex and violence. Rather, I am asking: How much time should go to entertaining myself, and which activities are really relaxing? Maybe I'm missing something here, but I don't find television viewing relaxing at all.

These are some of my reasons. And, by the way, people freed from television find a lot of imaginative and satisfying ways to fill newly discovered time.

Each of us has precious little time to use as we wish. Why should so much of that time go to television?

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