

One way to resist the media moguls is to switch off

Contributed by Debbie Smit
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Imagine a gizmo that can turn off absolutely any TV; a universal remote that will remind people that there is an off button on the TV and the reason it's there is so that you can switch the TV off. Predictably, someone did invent one in 2004. What is interesting is that when the inventor, Mitch Altman, tested it, people took at least 10 seconds to realise that the TV had been switched off, and typically just kept staring at the set.

For Altman, the TV-B-Gone, which has only one button and looks like a car remote, is all about rescuing humanity from the omnipresent attention-sapping presence of television programming. Today Altman, an impish 48 year-old, spends his days perfecting the device, an end that he regards as more beneficial than programming other technological devices, which he says are at best benign.

This week was TV-Turnoff Week 2006. The annual TV-Turnoff Week began in 1995, initiated by the TV-Turnoff Network, (www.tvturnoff.org) that encourages children and adults to watch less television to promote healthier lives and communities.

Well, my kids and I participated. OK, we did cheat a little, finding ourselves unable to resist the second episode of Survivor Guatemala, but, apart from a few choice programmes, we consumed far less television, which Frank Lloyd Wright called "chewing gum for the eyes", than usual.

According to the TV-Turnoff Network fact sheet:

TV undermines family life. 54 percent of 4-6 year-olds said they would rather watch TV than spend time with their fathers. According to an American Research Council survey, parents only spend an average of 38,5 minutes a week in meaningful conversation with their children.

TV hampers education. Groucho Marx said that he found TV very educational, because every time someone switched one on he went into another room and read a book. The fact sheet notes that parents have a 1 in 12 chance of getting their kids to do their homework before watching TV.

TV promotes obesity. Men who watch more than 21 hours of TV a week double their chances of developing Type II diabetes.

TV promotes violence. The average American child sees 200 000 acts of violence on TV by the age of 18.

TV promotes overconsumption. Children develop brand loyalty by the age of 2, so the annual \$1.5 billion adspend directed at young children is well worth it for advertisers.

I know you probably hate statistics (especially ones from America), as much as I do, but these are good for driving a point home (don't spout them at dinner parties).

In the past week, my ten year-old son did all his homework before 5 o'clock, without the threat of "no TV until you've done your homework." My 14 year-old daughter, a serial TV watcher, began conversing with her brother (usually they seldom talk to each other than arguing over which TV programme to watch) and although she complained of boredom, she accepted the absence of the "box".

Unlike giving up cigarettes or coffee, giving up TV has no withdrawal symptoms and one doesn't need a 12 step programme to recover from the addiction. When we did watch TV we really enjoyed it, but were quite happy to switch off when we had finished watching.

I probably spent more time in front of the computer screen this week (for work of course) and discovered a new world – the Vlogosphere – on a website called wearethemedia.com. We Are The Media aims to empower people to become their own media source, removing control of the media from the burgeoning monopoly that controls broadcasting. Vlog is webspeak for videoblog.

Roll on TV-Turnoff Week 2007!

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