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TV-free week: power down, dream big

"Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely... Winston kept his back turned to the telescreen."

—1984 by George Orwell

"Television is a vast wasteland."

—1961 Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minnow

Is there any question about the effect of TV on viewers, on society? A University of Chicago study demonstrated that the more time people spent with screens, the less likely they were to vote. Other studies conclude that watching TV leads to obesity, illiteracy and violence.

A Harvard University study showed that symptoms of eating disorders multiplied five times among teenage girls on Fiji since television arrived on the Pacific Island in 1995. It is documented that families and communities suffer when people are more solitary and sedentary.

April 21-27 is the 14th Turnoff TV Week. Sponsored by the Center for Screentime Awareness (screentime.org), the 2008 theme is Power Down, Dream Big. The event suggests that you not watch TV for an entire week. Instead, the Center for Screentime Awareness encourages people to have meals together, take advantage of physical fitness opportunities, read, go to real life events, play games together and just enjoy the company of other human beings, pets and nature.

In 1977, Jerry Mander, the former

president of a national advertising agency, wrote "Four Arguments for the Elimination Of Television." Today, it is more relevant than ever.

Mander describes how television is advertising. Its purpose is to sell. He also explores the impact television has on the

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human mind and body. For example, the induction of alpha waves, a hypnotizing effect that a motionless mind enters; how viewers often regard what they see on television as real, even though the programs are filled with quick camera switches, rapid image movement, computer generated objects, computer generated morphing and other technical events; the placement of artificial images into our mind; and, the effects that large amounts of television viewing have on children and the onset of attention deficit disorder.

The first argument is about the process that has redirected human experience and perceived reality to the point that television seems useful, interesting, sane and worthwhile. The second argument concerns the control exerted on viewers. The third argument addresses the effects of television upon the human body and mind, effects that fit the purposes of the people who control the medium.

The fourth argument asserts that television has no democratic potential. The medium chooses the content from a narrow field of possibilities, which re-

stricts human understanding. Mander's conclusion is that, when taken together these arguments suggest that television is not "reformable."

Sales, by definition, is the process of convincing someone to purchase what they don't need. Advertising tries to convince you that the solution to a problem or the fulfillment of a desire can only be achieved through the purchase of a product. But "need" is something basic to human survival or contentment—food, shelter, clothing, peace, love, safety, companionship, and a sense of fulfillment—that people will seek whether or not there is advertising.

Television promotes a lifestyle. It is a virtual reality that advertisers and networks seek to promote in order to make money. While watching television, the viewer is not seeing the world as it is—it is a world created by advertising. Television programs are put together with the express purpose of promoting a consumer society.

What makes television different from other forms of advertising, is that the viewer has no control over the images. The images are controlled at the pace of the advertiser; the viewer watches passively. The only way to escape TV images is to turn the machine off. The medium of television is controlled by the sender, not the viewer.

Advertisers know that before you can convince anyone of anything, a viewer's existing mental state must be

shattered, then restructured through the use of a few simple techniques like fast-moving images, jumping among attention focuses, and switching moods. Television imagery is a form of sleep teaching. The information goes right into our memory but we don't react to it. When you watch television you are training yourself not to react. But later on you may find yourself doing things without knowing why you're doing them or where the idea came from.

Television offers neither rest nor stimulation. Television inhibits your ability to think, but it does not lead to freedom of mind, relaxation or renewal. It leads to a more exhausted mind. You may have time out from prior obsessive thought patterns, but that is as far as television goes. The mind is never empty, the mind is filled. What's worse, it is filled with someone else's obsessive thoughts and images.

Why do you think they call it programming?

Turnoff TV Week is a time for each of us to look at our relationship with the screen, to think about how it affects us and our family and to consider all the things we could be doing or learning or experiencing, which would lead to more functional, healthy and perhaps interesting lifestyles.

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