

## Turned On, Tuned Out

Television is becoming impossible to avoid, but that doesn't mean we can't ignore it.

By Margaret Talbot

Whenever TV takes over a new place, you remember how few places there are where it is not. The back seats of taxicabs used to be a place where TV was not - where you could, if you wished, let your mind drift or becalm itself. Supermarkets were another - shopping alone, you could glide through their fish-tank fluorescence in your own little world. And the back seats of family vehicles were another. Anything could go on there - sibling fights, tearful reconciliations, the vouchsafing of sexual information, the grinding of fast food into upholstery but none of it was broadcast; all of it was yours.

Of these three territories, the family car was colonized first. Car manufacturers started offering backseat video screens in 1999, and according to the Consumer Electronics Association, more than 400,000 "mobile video units" were installed last year. They are particularly popular in minivans and S.U.V's. Some families have multiple screens in one car. Last year, a company called Impli started installing TV's in the checkout line at Ralphs supermarkets in Orange County, Calif. And last fall, the New York Taxi and Limousine Commission began allowing seven companies to install television screens in the backs of cabs 178 to begin with, an estimated several thousand over the coming months. Two are intended to be interactive -- they allow riders to check on movie times and the like. But none of them can be turned off, which would seem to undermine the notion of interactivity.

We probably all had public places we were willing to cede to TV. For me, it was airplanes. Truthfully, I'd rather watch my 3-year-old go slack-jawed in front of "Yogi Bear" reruns than have to spend half the flight crawling around the food carts in pursuit of her. The airlines don't really care for your roaming the aisles anymore, and they especially don't care for your barreling toward the cockpit. Besides, airline travel is already so infantilizing; why not succumb?

And yet, the more places TV invades, the less privacy we have in public. The privacy you find in public places can be a powerful thing - lonely, glamorous, surreal. Even children can sense it - gazing out the car window, imagining they live other lives in one of those other houses they pass every day. Sometimes, in moments of public privacy, you can feel your mind in command of itself, like William James's idea of the unified consciousness, ably turning away unwanted stimuli that "show their faces at the door," until "the actual possessors" of your thoughts grow "tired." And then, perhaps, you invite the visitors in.

It is true, in a way, that the more stimuli you have to contend with, the easier it is for you to selectively tune it out. You might even say that adaptively, over the years, we've become better at just that. The ad-skipping features on hard-drive recorders like TiVo and ReplayTV are merely the technical embodiments of a shift in attention we already effect all the time - when we channelhop, talk through commercials or assimilate them as a kind of static. Even my 6-year-old knows how to use the mute button when those Hooked on Phonics ads interrupt Toon Disney. He recognizes what a commercial is and how he might shut his ears, anyway, to its importunings. They're there, murmuring to us, but at a distance. In a society as tirelessly profit-making as ours, products can sabotage themselves with their very proliferation.

We've gotten sharp, but we'll have to get sharper, because one way companies and broadcasters are fighting back against our capacity to ad-skip - mentally or technologically - is

by blurring the lines between commercials and programming still further. "For better or worse," Vivien Marx wrote recently in the British publication *New Scientist*, "technology now allows TV programs to morph into a sort of dynamic database that gives you access to all kinds of spending opportunities." There was a brief moment when you could hear the phrase "interactive TV" and imagine that it might mean, say, expressing an opinion about the content of a show, maybe even influencing that content. What it is turning out to mean is the "opportunity," as it's often called, to buy things. I myself am an enthusiastic buyer of things, but it's not an opportunity I feel I lack. Means at times - but not opportunity. Analysts at one technology research firm, reports *New Scientist*, "suggest looking out for sitcom plot lines that revolve around a shortage of a particular brand" of diaper, for example, "with discounts for viewers who interact." The company that developed the international TV hit "Big Brother" boasts that its customers will no longer be broadcasters but advertisers, who "become owners of a format in which we translate their company goals."

Eventually, I hope, we'll learn to tune out these more sophisticated forms of product placement, just as we've learned to tune out, or at least turn down, the 30second ad, to leave it nibbling at the corners of our consciousness, rather than flopping down in the center of it. In the meantime, somebody please figure out a way to turn off the TV in my cab.

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