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## The Tube: America's Favorite Scapegoat

December 15, 2012 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube 1

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I was recently in Austin, Texas, for a television studies conference. Yes, people actually study TV. While I was there, I picked up a copy of the publication [Infowars](#), which is either a collection of conspiracy theories or a collection of truths, depending on your point of view. The cover illustration for this issue depicts a zombie arm emerging from a TV set, attempting to grab innocent children parked in front of the flickering screen. The corresponding article goes on to say that

TV turns us into zombies, "proving" that it truly is the "opiate of the masses" as some suspected all along.

Finding these type of extreme statements in Infowars isn't surprising, nor are they unique to this publication. Pejorative attitudes about TV—and fears over what it can do to us—have been around since television's inception. With regularity, news headlines read "5 Ways Your TV is Slowly Killing You" (MSNBC, 2010) or "TV Watching Shortens Lifespan" (Fox News, 2011).

Due to the belief that TVs are out to get us, some groups now urge people to be proactive and kill their televisions before their televisions can do away with them. For example, the Screen Time Awareness group recommends getting rid of TV entirely, but settles for annual TV-Turnoff Week, also known as Screen-Free Week or Device Detox to represent our engagement with multiple gadgets. Turn off your TVs, they say, and "turn on life." But people aren't turning off their TVs. Instead, they're watching more. Why? The anti-TV crowd would probably say it's because we're all addicted.

Throughout its history, television has frequently been discussed in terms of addiction, both metaphorically and literally. In the book [The Plug-In Drug](#) (1977), Marie Winn positions TV as a drug dealer, pushing addictive content to a bunch of junkie viewers who can't get enough. In the '90s, a series of academic studies detailed how viewers who sat down to watch particular programs found themselves mindlessly watching TV hours later, powerless to shift their eyeballs from the screen. Through shows like [My Strange Addiction](#), TV itself has taught us that people can become addicted to anything — cleaning, eating chalk, smelling gasoline. So, it's entirely possible that there are TV addicts out there; however, the average viewer probably doesn't experience withdrawal symptoms when they miss an episode of [Homeland](#).

Besides television's addictive potential, another anti-television assumption is that it makes people dumb and pacified, hence its nickname: the idiot box. TV allegedly has hypnotizing effects that reduce brain activity and impair critical thinking abilities. The result is our transformation into sheeple who are highly susceptible to brainwashing. What's awesome about this fear is that it is actually grounded in real attempts to control and persuade. The military used propaganda to try to convince people to buy war bonds in the '40s, and some governments in Europe did view early radio and television broadcast technologies as potential methods of social control. What most aspiring persuaders found was that TV does have the power to set agendas for public discussion and may generally influence things like our consumption patterns and desires. I mean, Phil Dunphy's constant iPad tinkering on [Modern Family](#) does make owning one seem pretty damn cool. Still, TV does not have the power to directly control us.

As if it's not bad enough that TV is making us all dumb, there are those who believe it's also making us fat. This particular anti-television assumption is gaining a lot of traction amid concerns that we are in an "obesity epidemic." The logic goes that watching television acts as a sedentary replacement for physical activity. Food advertisements for triple-decker bacon cheeseburgers stimulate food intake. Combine those factors with a day-long marathon of [Breaking Bad](#) and you'll be "mindlessly eating" your way to a bigger waistline. Nevermind the

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multitude of other factors in our daily lives that encourage physical inactivity (commutes, desk jobs, you name it) or dietary patterns that emphasize convenience foods, it's all TV's fault.

Ultimately, these anti-television assumptions feed derisive attitudes toward television, and those attitudes about television simultaneously inspire more anti-television assumptions. It's a never ending cycle of television hate.

A lot of these anti-TV assumptions and fears are based on outdated understandings of the way communication and media work. An early model of television hypothesized it operating like a 'magic bullet' or 'hypodermic needle,' injecting content into our brains. But this idea was never widely accepted, and was thoroughly disproved by the mid-40s.

Other anti-TV assumptions and fears are based on our cultural and historical understandings of television. Because television is watched in the home (a traditionally feminized, domestic space) and is a commercial medium (it's supported by advertisers) it falls into the popular culture side of the 'art versus popular culture' dichotomy. Although this division is more or less arbitrary, popular culture historically denotes a culture of the lower classes. Class-based biases about bad taste and appreciation for "lowest common denominator" entertainment extends from the people who are doing the watching to the culture itself.

TV's historical targeting of mass audiences and continued appeal to very large groups of people also fosters cultural anxiety and fear. If we identify ourselves as individuals through the distinctions we make about culture (film, music, whatever), then watching the same television show enjoyed by millions of other people doesn't lend itself to feeling particularly special. This explains why a lot of people take pride in not watching or owning a TV (by the way, dudes, watching TV on your computer is still watching TV), or proclaim to only watch the "culturally valuable" and "educational" programming provided by PBS (Downton Abbey for the win!).

Even some TV doesn't want to be associated with TV because of these assumptions about commercialism and class. Why else would HBO relentlessly market itself through the tagline "It's Not TV. It's HBO"?

Granted, some people may legitimately not like television's general mode of storytelling, or may find it distasteful for some reason not addressed here. In writing this, I'm not trying to argue that TV is actually art or some kind of legitimate culture, but that I do believe anti-TV assumptions and "kill your TV" pronouncements are based more on fear than fact. Most TV is bad. But that's ultimately what makes TV so great.

*Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at The University of Iowa, specializing in media and critical cultural studies.*

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### About Melissa Zimdars

*Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, specializing in all things television.*

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## Comments

### One thought on "The Tube: America's Favorite Scapegoat"



Bob Arbuckle December 15, 2012 at 3:14 pm - Reply

I have bet many people \$100 that they could not go thirty days without watching TV. Most said they knew they would not take the bet. Those who did lost within a week.

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