

Entertainment's Hidden Cost: Isolated Lives

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Social connections unravel as home gadgets multiply

*Proliferation of technology increases **isolation**, affects mental health, character, experts warn.*

Like tens of thousands of other people, Kevin Brownlee bought a new **television** set last month.

The 24-year-old then took it back to his Warren apartment, a home-entertainment paradise that already contained a 51-inch big-screen TV, two computers, two video game systems, a DVD player and a VCR.

"TV is like one of my best friends," said Brownlee, who works at a suburban movie theater. "I don't think technology takes over my life, it just makes it better."

Others might disagree. According to a variety of experts, an unprecedented explosion of home-entertainment diversions over the past three decades has had a major and potentially alarming impact on the way Americans live in communities, interact as families and grow as individuals.

A mere 25 years ago, video games, personal computers, cable **television** and home-movie systems were either in their infancy or nonexistent. Yet today, Americans annually spend hundreds of billions of dollars on such options while attending concerts, sporting events and movies in droves. Meanwhile, participation in civic organizations, political volunteerism, Social interactions with friends and the rate of personal savings have declined drastically.

As a result, some say the price we are paying for entertainment is too high. Not in terms of dollars and cents, but in terms of a sense of well-being.

"Enduring life satisfaction is much, much better predicted by the quantity and quality of your social ties than it is by the quantity and quality of your electronic possessions," said Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard University social scientist whose book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community" was an in-depth study of the effect **television** and its accompanying paraphernalia have had on society/

"**Television** is in general really awful for family and community life," Putnam says. "Most Americans watch 'Friends' rather than having friends."

How is the proliferation of home-entertainment technology affecting Americans? The numbers tracking the rise of home technology and the fall of social interaction are startling:

- In 1980, the sales of color televisions, personal computers, VCRs and DVD players in America accounted for \$5.125 billion, according to the Consumer Electronics Association. By 2002, those sales had skyrocketed to \$21.237 billion.
- In 1965, 7 percent of Americans spent time daily working for a community organization. By 1995, that community participation indicator had declined to 3 percent, according to Putnam's book.
- In 1978, when 78 percent of households already had a color TV, Americans spent \$3.583 billion on new color TVs. In 2002, when 98 percent of households had a color TV, Americans spent a whopping \$7.233 billion on new color TVs.
- In 1978 Americans put 9 percent of their disposable income into personal savings. By 2002, it was only 4 percent, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis.
- Family dinners and family vacations or even just sitting and talking with your family are down by one third in the last 25 years, while having friends over to the house is down by 45 percent, according to the Saguaro Seminar which studies issues of trust and community at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. It also serves as Putnam's research base.

The problem with the rise of technology and the fall of social interaction is that both communities and individuals are healthier and happier when people interact, Putnam says.

According to the Saguaro Seminar, joining one community group cuts your odds of dying over the next year in half, while joining two groups cuts it by three quarters.

"The most important category of things that makes us happy is connecting with other people," Putnam said. "Technology privatizing our time is bad for our private health, the health of our families and the health of our communities."

Fragmenting Families

Putnam is hardly alone in his criticism. As the average number of televisions in households has grown to 2.4 and the average cable TV customer's channel choices have grown to more than 100, what used to be a uniting family experience has become fractious as family members retire to separate televisions to feed individual interests.

"Entertainment has greatly influenced the separation within the household," said Lyn Lewis, a sociology professor at University of Detroit Mercy. "It has caused us to become more isolated, to become strangers in the same household."

"Are we running away from ourselves and are we running away from the ones we love? We really don't know what's in each other's heads; we don't know each other's wants and needs."

And that lack of knowledge extends beyond the family.

"In 1966, you could pretty much bet the farm that your neighbor watched 'Ed Sullivan' and 'Bonanza' on Sunday night," said Mary Ann Watson, a telecommunications professor at Eastern Michigan University. "Now, the likelihood that you and your neighbor watched the same thing on any given evening is probably at the lowest point it's ever been."

"We're missing the idea that we have this common destiny, that we really are all citizens of the same republic."

Beyond the impact on communities and families, the rise of home technology likely has shaped our individual characters.

"We have become less patient. The technology trains us to want things immediately, to want things faster and faster," said Daniel Marcus, who teaches media studies at Wayne State University.

In a world where media constantly portray casual violence, glossy relationships and quick stories and characters, Marcus also said it may be hard to perceive anything as real.

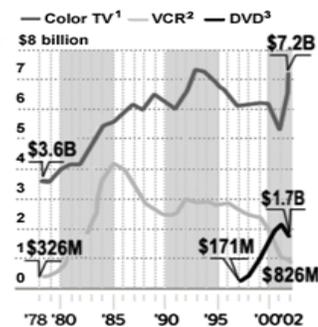
"In many ways, people today may have a problem connecting their actions with consequences," he said. "I think we vicariously experience so many things, so many lives, so many stories, that perhaps leads us to divorce our actions from a sense of consequences."

Moreover, there is the simple worry of whether people have enough time away from the babble of media and entertainment to actually consider their lives.

"One of the things I think we've given up is rumination," Watson said. "I don't know when people think."

TV, DVD sales rise

Sales of color televisions and DVD players continue to rise. VCR system sales began to decline in the late '90s.

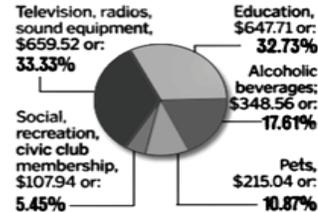


¹Does not include TV/VCR combinations, projection TVs, LCD or digital TV sets; ²Includes stereo capable; ³Includes sales of DVD audio players.
Source: Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) Market Research

Americans value TV

The average American spent more on televisions, radios and sound equipment in 2001 than on education, club memberships or pets.

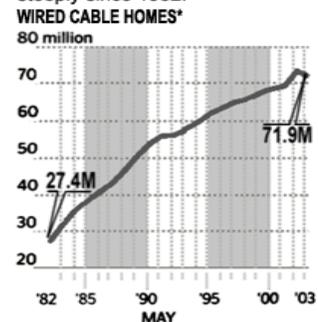
AVERAGE AMOUNT AMERICANS SPENT ON SOME GOODS AND SERVICES IN 2001:



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Homes wired

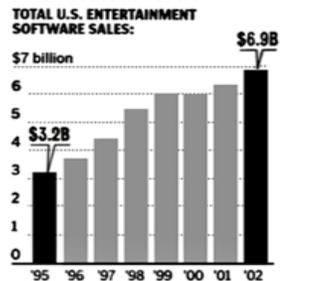
The number of American homes connected to cable has grown steeply since 1982.



Source: Nielsen Station Index Sample Data

Games galore

Sales of video and computer games more than doubled to \$6.98 billion between 1995 and 2002.



Source: Entertainment Software Association

Life on Remote Control

The appeal of home entertainment is undeniable. For one thing, sitting down and watching a movie on TV is cheaper and easier than going out to a movie or enlisting in any social activity.

"Leisure activities outside the home require you to coordinate your behavior with somebody else," Putnam said. Inside the home, you just push a remote control.

Entertainment certainly serves a purpose, if only to offer escape.

"It takes away from reality, that's the main point," said 23-year-old Jennifer Sloan of Grosse Pointe Shores, who estimates she spends some \$235 a month on cable TV, DVDs, movies and her computer. "You don't need to dwell on everything going on in your life and your work."

Beyond that, entertainment offers people a way to process the world around them, said Jerry Herron, director of American Studies at Wayne State University.

"Entertainment is how we find out who we are. It's the thing that calls out to me and makes me want to laugh, want to weep. It's the way I find out what's inside of me."

The problem may be, Herron said, that fewer people now are acting on what they learn from entertainment.

"Once we find out who we are, are we going to do anything about it? Or does the entertainment take the place of action?"

Certainly the American trend toward cocooning and a staying within the home was helped along by the rise of home entertainment. It was likely pushed even further by the terrorist attacks of 2001.

"After Sept. 11, a lot of the activities people took heart in were home-based," said Leo Kivijarv, director of research and publications for merchant bank Veronis Suhler Stevenson in New York City. "They were renting more home videos so they could be with family."

Suddenly home entertainment systems became safe ports for families.

"Five years ago, I would have thought twice about buying my kids a video game, but I think in the last two Christmases, people have been encouraged to buy a game system because then they'll know where the kids are: They're in front of the game," said Tom Edwards, an analyst with the NPD research group in New York.

Not surprisingly, many people who are surrounded by home-entertainment options, like Jeff Kanoza, are perfectly happy with the current state of things.

The 33-year-old Troy resident owns three color televisions--one big screen--two DVD players, one VCR and two old video game systems he fires up every once in a while.

"I use (the stuff) quite a bit, but honestly, I don't think it does keep me from doing other things," Kanoza said. "You can make time if you want to make time for these things."

Still, he understands the concerns.

"It makes it too easy to cocoon yourself in your own house," he said. "You're less likely to go out and meet people when you have all these other distractions."

Double-Edged Sword

Theresa Burcz of Northville reared her two children on one TV just as the home technology boom was reaching full speed. Now she has added a VCR, but admits, "I'm still living in the Middle Ages."

She is doing so consciously and questions the need for so much home gadgetry.

"It's kind of like a double-edged sword," said Burcz, 62. "It's good if they're using it for school work, if they're getting information. But I don't care for it when you find kids sitting in front of the TV or computer when they could be out doing

something."

For her family, watching TV was mostly a shared experience.

"Although kids need to have their privacy; there are some things you do as a family" she said.

Andrea Dimuzio of Southfield has two teens at home and is dealing with such questions right now. Her family has two TVs, a VCR, cable TV and a video game system.

"(TV is) a tremendous babysitter, but when they get that glazed look in their eyes, then you know it's time to get them away from it," said Dimuzio, 46. "I'm always telling my kids, 'Go on outside; you're done with this.'"

But the show never really ends for many kids and adults. The average American spent 3,570 hours with various forms of media in 2001. That number is expected to grow at a compound rate of 1.2 percent to 3,800 hours in 2006, according to researchandmarkets.com, a Web site that tracks industries and trends.

It is all part of a trend that dates back more than 100 years, according to Harvard's Putnam. At that time, most communities had town bands and drama organizations. If you wanted to hear music or watch a play, you gathered as a social group to do so. That shared experience helped bind the community.

Then came the phonograph, and radio, and the moving picture. America began its postwar cocooning process with the advent of **television** in the 1950s, and the technology boom has been going full force since then.

"It is a really fundamental transformation of our lives--the privatization of our leisure time through a whole lot of technological innovations," Putnam said. "Each of us now gets precisely the entertainment that we individually want.

"The downside is, I'm doing it utterly alone. The idea of family viewing is about as outdated as 'Leave It To Beaver.'"