CHAPTER 13
Technology
and Mass Media

When the history of the twentieth century is written with greater perspective than we now enjoy, the impact of technology on communications and leisure will almost surely be a major theme. At the beginning of the century the communications and entertainment industries hardly existed outside small publishing houses and music halls. The first quarter of the century had nearly passed before the term mass media was invented. At the end of the century, by contrast, the gradual merger of the massive telecommunications and entertainment industries had become the very foundation for a new economic era.

Among the effects of this century-long transformation, two are especially relevant here. First, news and entertainment have become increasingly individualized. No longer must we coordinate our tastes and timing with others in order to enjoy the rarest culture or the most esoteric information. In 1900 music lovers needed to sit with scores of other people at fixed times listening to fixed programs, and if they lived in small towns as most Americans did, the music was likely to be supplied by enthusiastic local amateurs.* In 2000, with my hi-fi Walkman CD, wherever I live I can listen to precisely what I want when I want and where I want. As late as 1975 Americans nationwide chose among a handful of television programs. Barely a quarter century later, cable, satellite, video, and the Internet provide an exploding array of individual choice.

* Virtually all small towns in New Hampshire, where I am writing this book, supported town bands in that era; few do now.
Second, electronic technology allows us to consume this hand-tailored entertainment in private, even utterly alone. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, low-cost entertainment was available primarily in public settings, like the baseball park, the dance hall, the movie theater, and the amusement park, although by the 1930s radio was rapidly becoming an important alternative, the first of a series of electronic inventions that would transform American leisure. In the last half of the century television and its offspring moved leisure into the privacy of our homes. As the poet T. S. Eliot observed early in the television age, “It is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.” The artifice of canned laughter reflected both the enduring fact that mirth is enhanced by companionship and the novel fact that companionship could now be simulated electronically. At an accelerating pace throughout the century, the electronic transmission of news and entertainment changed virtually all features of American life.

The pace of this transformation was astonishing, even by the standards of modern technology. Table 2 shows the speed at which a range of modern appliances diffused into American households during the twentieth century. Those that provided electronic entertainment—radio, the video recorder, and, above all, television—spread into homes at all levels in American society five to ten times more quickly than other devices that are now nearly as ubiquitous. Even more than the automobile, these innovations are transforming how we spend our days. In this chapter we investigate whether they are implicated in the erosion of America’s social capital, as well.

Although modern media offer both information and entertainment—indeed, they increasingly blur the line between the two—it is important from the point of view of civic engagement to treat the two somewhat separately.

The first means of mass communication and entertainment, of course,

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was not electronic, but the printed word and, above all, the newspaper. Alexis de Tocqueville saw clearly the importance of mass communication for civic engagement:

When no firm and lasting ties any longer unite men, it is impossible to obtain the cooperation of any great number of them unless you can persuade every man whose help is required that he serves his private interests by voluntarily uniting his efforts to those of all the others. That cannot be done habitually and conveniently without the help of a newspaper. Only a newspaper can put the same thought at the same time before a thousand readers. . . . So hardly any democratic association can carry on without a newspaper.¹

Nearly two centuries later newspaper readership remains a mark of substantial civic engagement. Newspaper readers are older, more educated, and more rooted in their communities than is the average American. Even holding age, education, and rootedness constant, however, those who read the news are more engaged and knowledgeable about the world than those who only watch the news. Compared to demographically identical nonreaders, regular newspaper readers belong to more organizations, participate more actively in clubs and civic associations, attend local meetings more frequently, vote more regularly, volunteer and work on community projects more often, and even visit with friends more frequently and trust their neighbors more.³ Newspaper readers are machers and schmoozers.

Without controlled experiments, we can’t be certain which causes which. Virtually all nonexperimental studies of the media find it hard to distinguish between “selection effects” (people with a certain trait seek out a particular medium) and “media effects” (people develop that trait by being exposed to that medium). We shall have to grapple with that analytic problem repeatedly in this chapter. Nevertheless, the evidence makes quite clear that newspaper reading and good citizenship go together.

We should probably not be altogether surprised, therefore, that newspaper readership has been plunging in recent decades, along with most other measures of social capital and civic engagement. In 1948, when the median American adult had nine years of formal schooling, daily newspaper circulation was 1.3 papers per household. That is, a half century ago the average American family read more than one newspaper a day. Fifty years later schooling had risen by 50 percent, but newspaper readership had fallen by 57 percent, despite the fact that newspaper reading is highly correlated with education.⁵

Newspaper reading is a lasting habit established early in adult life. If we start young, we generally continue. Virtually none of the precipitous decline in newspaper circulation over the last half century can be traced to declining readership by individuals. Virtually all of the decline is due to the by now fa-
miliar pattern of generational succession. As figure 53 shows, three out of every four Americans born in the first third of the twentieth century continue to read a daily newspaper as the century closes, just as that generation did decades ago. Fewer than half of their boomer children are carrying on the tradition, however, a fraction that has dwindled to one in four among their X'er grandchildren. Since more recent cohorts show no sign of becoming newspaper readers as they age, circulation continues to plunge as the generation of readers is replaced by the generation of nonreaders. Reversing that slump will not be easy, since each year the ground is slipping away beneath our feet.

One might imagine that the explanation for this trend is simple: TV. We’re now watching news, not reading it. The facts, however, are more complicated. Americans have not simply shifted their news consumption from the printed page to the glowing screen. In fact, Americans who watch the news on television are more likely to read the daily newspaper than are other Americans, not less likely. In the lingo of economics, TV news and the daily newspaper are complements, not substitutes. Some of us are news hounds, and some are not.

It is not just newspaper readership, but interest in the news per se that is declining generationally. As figure 54 shows, when people are asked whether they “need to get the news (world, national, sports, and so on) every day,” the answer turns out to depend on when they were born. A more or less steady two-

![Figure 53: Generational Succession Explains the Demise of Newspapers](image-url)
thirds of people born before 1930 say "definitely" or "generally" yes. Among the generation of their children and grandchildren (born after 1960) news interest is barely half as great. Moreover, figure 54 shows absolutely no evidence of a life cycle growth in news interest among the younger generations that might eventually bring them to the level of their parents and grandparents.

Since watching the news and reading the news are both elements in the same syndrome, it is hardly surprising that TV news viewing is positively associated with civic involvement. Those of us who rely solely on TV news are not quite as civic in our behavior as our fellow citizens who rely on newspapers, but we news watchers are nevertheless more civic than most other Americans. Regular viewers of network newscasts (as well as followers of National Public Radio and even of the local TV news) spend more time on community projects, attend more club meetings, and follow politics much more closely than other Americans (even when matched in terms of age, education, sex, income, and so on). Americans who follow news on television (compared with those who don’t) are more knowledgeable about public affairs, vote more regularly, and are generally more active in community affairs, though they are not quite as distinctively civic as newspaper readers.8

Unfortunately, like news readership, news viewership is on the decline, as we would predict from figure 54. In recent years the falloff in the audience for network news has been even faster than the decline in newspaper circulation:

![Figure 54: Newshounds Are a Vanishing Breed](image)
for example, the regular audience for nightly network news plunged from 60 percent of adults in 1993 to 38 percent in 1998. Moreover, as with newspaper circulation, much of the decline in television news viewing is driven by generational differences. The audience for network news is aging rapidly, as one might easily guess from the health aid advertising that supports Brokaw, Jennings, and Rather. According to a 1997 study by NBC News, while the average age of the audience for all prime-time programs was forty-two, the average age of the audience for nightly newscasts was fifty-seven. Moreover, newscast viewers nowadays are poised to switch away at a moment’s notice: half of all Americans report that they watch the news with a remote control in hand.\(^9\)

Some see hope in the rise of news on the Internet or the all-news cable channels. It is still too early to predict the long-run effects of these new channels. That said, the early returns are not encouraging. First, just as TV newshounds are disproportionately newspaper readers, most people who follow news on the Internet or on all-news cable channels also are “generalists” in their news consumption. CNN viewers, for example, are twice as likely as other Americans to watch the evening network newscasts. Even enthusiasts for Internet news concede that “the Internet is emerging as a supplement to—not a substitute for—other traditional news sources.” In fact, as usage of the Internet expanded in the second half of the 1990s, usage of it to follow public affairs became relatively less important.\(^10\) In short, the newer media are mainly drawing on the steadily shrinking traditional audience for news, not expanding it.

Moreover, unlike those who rely on newspapers, radio, and television for news, those few technologically proficient Americans who rely primarily on the Internet for news are actually less likely than their fellow citizens to be civically involved.\(^11\) Of course, this does not prove that the Net is socially demobilizing. These “early adopters” of Internet news may well have been socially withdrawn to begin with. Nevertheless, Internet and cable news outlets seem unlikely to offset the civic losses from the shrinking audiences for network broadcast and print news.

Most of the time, energy, and creativity of the electronic media, however, is devoted not to news, but to entertainment. Watching the news is not harmful to your civic health. What about television entertainment? Here we must begin with the most fundamental fact about the impact of television on Americans: Nothing else in the twentieth century so rapidly and profoundly affected our leisure.

In 1950 barely 10 percent of American homes had television sets, but by 1959, 90 percent did, probably the fastest diffusion of a technological innovation ever recorded. (The spread of Internet access will rival TV’s record but probably not surpass it.) The reverberations from this lightning bolt continued unabated for decades, as per capita viewing hours grew by 17–20 percent dur-
ing the 1960s, by an additional 7–8 percent during the 1970s, and by another 7–8 percent from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. (For one measure of this steady growth, see the Nielsen ratings for household viewing hours in figure 55.) In the early years TV watching was concentrated among the less educated sectors of the population, but during the 1970s the viewing time of the more educated sectors of the population began to converge upward. Television viewing increases with age, particularly upon retirement, but each generation since the introduction of television has begun its life cycle at a higher starting point. Partly because of these generational differences, the fraction of American adults who watch “whatever’s on”—that is, those of us who turn on the TV with no particular program in mind—jumped from 29 percent in 1979 to 43 percent by the end of the 1980s. By 1995 viewing per TV household was more than 50 percent higher than it had been in the 1950s.12

Most studies estimate that the average American now watches roughly four hours per day, very nearly the highest viewership anywhere in the world. Time researchers John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, using the more conservative time diary technique for determining how people allocate their time, offer an estimate closer to three hours per day but conclude that as a primary activity, television absorbed almost 40 percent of the average American’s free time in 1995, an increase of roughly one-third since 1965. Between 1965 and 1995 we gained an average of six hours a week in added leisure time, and we

![Graph showing the growth in television viewing hours from 1950 to 1998.](image)

Figure 55: A Half Century’s Growth in Television Watching, 1950–1998
spent almost all six of those additional hours watching TV. In short, as Robinson and Godbey conclude, “Television is the 800-pound gorilla of leisure time.”

Moreover, multiple sets per household have proliferated: by the late 1990s three-quarters of all U.S. homes had more than one set, allowing even more private viewing. The fraction of sixth-graders with a TV set in their bedroom grew from 6 percent in 1970 to 77 percent in 1999. (Two kids in three aged 8–18 say that TV is usually on during meals in their home.) At the same time, during the 1980s the rapid diffusion of videocassette players and video games into American households added yet other forms of “screen time.” Finally, during the 1990s personal computers and Internet access dramatically broadened the types of information and entertainment brought into the American home. (Some of these trends are captured in figure 56.)

The single most important consequence of the television revolution has been to bring us home. As early as 1982, a survey by Scripps-Howard reported that eight out of the ten most popular leisure activities were typically based at home. Amid all the declining graphs for social and community involvement traced in the DDB Needham Life Style surveys from 1975 to 1999, one line stands out: The number of Americans who reported a preference for “spending a quiet evening at home” rose steadily. Not surprisingly, those who said so were heavily dependent on televised entertainment. While early enthusiasts for this

![Graph](image-url)
new medium spoke eagerly of television as an "electronic hearth" that would foster family togetherness, the experience of the last half century is cautionary. Social critic James Howard Kunstler's polemic is not far off target:

The American house has been TV-centered for three generations. It is the focus of family life, and the life of the house correspondingly turns inward, away from whatever occurs beyond its four walls. (TV rooms are called "family rooms" in builders' lingo. A friend who is an architect explained to me: "People don't want to admit that what the family does together is watch TV.") At the same time, the television is the family's chief connection with the outside world. The physical envelope of the house itself no longer connects their lives to the outside in any active way; rather, it seals them off from it. The outside world has become an abstraction filtered through television, just as the weather is an abstraction filtered through air conditioning.  

Time diaries show that husbands and wives spend three or four times as much time watching television together as they spend talking to each other, and six to seven times as much as they spend in community activities outside the home. Moreover, as the number of TV sets per household multiplies, even watching together becomes rarer. More and more of our television viewing is done entirely alone. At least half of all Americans usually watch by themselves, one study suggests, while according to another, one-third of all television viewing is done alone. Among children aged 8–18 the figures are even more startling: less than 5 percent of their TV-watching is done with their parents, and more than one-third is done entirely alone.  

Television viewing has steadily become a more habitual, less intentional part of our lives. Four times between 1979 and 1993 the Roper polling organization posed a revealing pair of questions to Americans:

When you turn the television set on, do you usually turn it on first and then look for something you want to watch, or do you usually turn it on only if you know there's a certain program you want to see?  

Some people like to have a TV set on, sort of in the background, even when they're not actually watching it. Do you find you frequently will just have the set on even though you're not really watching it, or [do you either watch it or turn it off]?  

Selective viewers (that is, those who turn on the television only to see a specific program and turn it off when they're not watching) are significantly more involved in community life than habitual viewers (those who turn the TV on without regard to what's on and leave it on in the background), even controlling for education and other demographic factors. For example, selective viewers are 23 percent more active in grassroots organizations and 33
percent more likely to attend public meetings than other demographically matched Americans. Habitual viewing is especially detrimental to civic engagement. Indeed, the effect of habitual viewing on civic disengagement is as great as the effect of simply watching more TV.15

Year by year we have become more likely to flick on the tube without knowing what we want to see and more likely to leave it on in the background even when we're no longer watching, as figure 57 shows. As recently as the late 1970s selective viewers outnumbered habitual viewers by more than three to two, but by the mid-1990s the proportions were reversed. In 1962, only a few years after television had become nearly ubiquitous, the leading character in The Manchurian Candidate could say, "There are two kinds of people in the world—those who walk into a room and turn the TV on, and those who walk into a room and turn the TV off."16 Four decades later the first kind of people have become more common and the second kind ever rarer.

Habituation to omnipresent television is much more pervasive among younger generations. (Keep in mind in this discussion that "younger" can include people in their forties at the turn of this century.) Even highly educated members of younger generations are much less likely to be selective viewers than less educated people from earlier generations. Of Americans born before 1933 (none of whom grew up with TV), 43 percent were selective viewers in 1993, roughly twice the rate of selective viewing (23 percent) that year among people born after 1963 (all of whom grew up with TV). Those of us who have

![Figure 57: TV Becomes an American Habit, as Selective Viewing Declines](image-url)
grown up in the television age are more much likely than our elders to consider TV a natural constant companion. This is precisely what we should expect if TV watching is a habit acquired most easily in childhood. In short, even when total TV hours are the same across different age groups—as they often are—different generations use television differently. Since the trend toward habitual TV watching mostly reflects the effects of generational succession, it is unlikely to be reversed anytime soon.20

Habitual viewing is not the only way in which generations differ in their television-viewing customs. Another is channel surfing. Figure 58, drawn from a 1996 Yankelovich Monitor survey, shows that when they are actually watching TV, younger generations (including boomers, compared with their elders) are more likely to surf from program to program, “grazing” or “multitasking” rather than simply following a single narrative. Other scholars have found that compared with teenagers in the 1950s, young people in the 1990s have fewer, weaker, and more fluid friendships.21 Although I know no systematic evidence that supports this hunch, I suspect that the link between channel surfing and social surfing is more than metaphorical.

The ubiquity of television in our lives can best be conveyed by examining what proportion of Americans report TV viewing in various slices of time throughout the day. The DDB Needham Life Style surveys from 1993 to 1998 asked respondents to indicate whether or not they had been watching TV dur-

Figure 58: Channel Surfing Is More Common Among Younger Generations
ing ten different periods throughout the previous day—from waking up in the morning to going to bed at night. During each period when they reported watching, they were asked whether this was mainly for information, mainly for entertainment, or "just for background." Figure 59 charts the national averages.

During every period of the day at least one-quarter of all adults report some TV viewing. After work this fraction rises to more than half, peaking at 86 percent during the aptly named "prime time" hours. In many homes television is merely on in the background, a kind of visual Muzak, but figure 59 shows that such casual usage accounts for a relatively small fraction of reported viewership. These averages include both working and nonworking Americans, though obviously the figures for workers are lower during the workday. Roughly half of all Americans—married and single, parents and childless—report watching television while eating dinner, and nearly one-third do so during breakfast and lunch. By the end of the twentieth century television had become omnipresent in Americans' lives.

Another way of seeing the dominance of television viewing in Americans' lives is to compare it with other ways in which we spend our evenings. Figure 60 shows that 81 percent of all Americans report that most evenings they watch TV, as compared with only 56 percent who talk with family members, 36 percent who have a snack, 27 percent who do household chores, and 7 percent

![Figure 59: America Watches TV All Day Every Day](image-url)
who walk the dog. Watching TV at night has become one of the few universals of contemporary American life.²⁴

This massive change in the way Americans spend our days and nights occurred precisely during the years of generational civic disengagement. How is television viewing related to civic engagement? In a correlational sense, the answer is simple: More television watching means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement. Television viewing is also correlated with other factors that depress civic involvement, including poverty, old age, low education, and so on. Thus in order to isolate the specific connection between television and social participation, we need to hold those other factors constant, statistically speaking. Other things being equal, such analysis suggests, each additional hour of television viewing per day means roughly a 10 percent reduction in most forms of civic activism—fewer public meetings, fewer local committee members, fewer letters to Congress, and so on.²⁵

If the time diary estimates are correct that Americans spent nearly an hour more per day in front of the tube in 1995 than in 1965, then that factor alone
might account for perhaps one-quarter of the entire drop in civic engagement over this period. I must, however, add two qualifications to this estimate, one that might bias it upward and one that might bias it downward. On the one hand, I have as yet offered no evidence that the causal arrow runs from TV watching to civic disengagement rather than the reverse. On the other hand, this estimate presumes that the only effect of TV on civic engagement comes from the number of hours watched, rather than something about the character of the watching, the watcher, and the watched.

Before we turn to these important subleties, figure 61 presents some of the evidence linking TV watching and civic disengagement. In order to screen out the effects of life cycle and education, we confine our attention here to working-age, college-educated Americans. (The pattern is even more marked within other, more TV-dependent segments of the population, such as retired people or the less well educated.) In this group those who watch an hour or less of television per day are half again as active civically as those who watch three hours or more a day. For example, 39 percent of the light viewers attended some public meeting on town or school affairs last year, as compared with only 25 percent of the demographically matched heavy viewers. Of the light viewers, 26 percent wrote Congress last year, compared with 21 percent of the heavy viewers. Of light viewers, 29 percent played a leadership role in some local organization, as contrasted with only 18 percent of heavy viewers. Light viewers were nearly three times more likely to have made a speech last year than were equally well-educated heavy viewers (14 percent to 5 percent).

The significance of these differences between heavy and light viewers is magnified by the fact that even among this select group of well-educated, working-age Americans, heavy viewers outnumber light viewers by nearly two to one. A major commitment to television viewing—such as most of us have come to have—is incompatible with a major commitment to community life.

In chapter 2 we noticed that collective forms of engagement, such as attending meetings, serving on committees, or working for a political party, had diminished much more rapidly over the last several decades than individual forms of engagement, such as writing to Congress or signing a petition. Both types of engagement can have political consequences, but only the former helps to foster and reinforce social connections. Television, it turns out, is bad for both individualized and collective civic engagement, but it is particularly toxic for activities that we do together. Whereas (controlling as always for demographic factors) watching lots of TV cuts individual activities, like letter writing, by roughly 10–15 percent, the same amount of additional TV viewing cuts collective activities, like attending public meetings or taking a leadership role in local organizations, by as much as 40 percent. In short, just as television privatizes our leisure time, it also privatizes our civic activity, dampening our interactions with one another even more than it dampens individual political activities.

As we have seen, newshounds who watch television for information are
more civic-minded than most other Americans. But most of us watch television for entertainment, not news. Of all Americans, 7 percent say that they watch primarily for information, as compared with 41 percent who say they watch primarily for entertainment. (The rest of us say that we watch for both information and entertainment; the inextricable link between information and entertainment—"infotainment"—is a notable feature of television that distinguishes it from other media, like books or radio.) We have already seen that the news and public affairs programming seems to have, if anything, a positive effect on civic engagement. How about TV entertainment?

One way to detect the effects of television entertainment on social participation is to focus on those people—half of all Americans—who say that "television is my primary form of entertainment." Not surprisingly, these people watch much more TV than other Americans, and they are much more likely to concede that "I'm what you would call a couch potato." In terms of civic engagement these people who are most heavily dependent on televised entertainment turn out to differ most remarkably from the other half of the American population.

Considered in combination with a score of other factors that predict social participation (including education, generation, gender, region, size of hometown, work obligations, marriage, children, income, financial worries, religiosity, race, geographic mobility, commuting time, homeownership, and
more), dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of civic disengagement. It is the single most consistent predictor that I have discovered.

People who say that TV is their “primary form of entertainment” volunteer and work on community projects less often, attend fewer dinner parties and fewer club meetings, spend less time visiting friends, entertain at home less, picnic less, are less interested in politics, give blood less often, write friends less regularly, make fewer long-distance calls, send fewer greeting cards and less e-mail, and express more road rage than demographically matched people who differ only in saying that TV is not their primary form of entertainment. TV dependence is associated not merely with less involvement in community life, but with less social communication in all its forms—written, oral, or electronic. This simple question turns out to distinguish those Americans who are most socially isolated from those most involved in their communities, as figures 62 to 66 illustrate. Nothing—not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes in urban agglomerations, not poverty or financial distress—is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on television for entertainment.30

On average, Americans who definitely disagree that “television is my primary form of entertainment”—let’s call them TV minimalists—volunteer nine times a year. By contrast, TV maximalists—those who definitely agree that TV

Figure 62: TV Watching and Volunteering Don’t Go Together
**Figure 63: TV Watchers Don’t Keep in Touch**

"TV is My Primary Form of Entertainment."

**Figure 64: TV Watching and Club Meetings Don’t Go Together**

"TV is My Primary Form of Entertainment."
Figure 65: TV Watching and Churchgoing Don’t Go Together

Figure 66: TV Watching and Comity Don’t Go Together
provides their prime leisure activity—volunteer only four times a year. TV minimalists average eighteen letters a year to friends and relatives, TV maximalists only twelve. TV minimalists attend nine club meetings annually, compared with five for TV maximalists. TV minimalists attend church, on average, twenty-seven times a year, compared with nineteen for TV maximalists. In fact, reliance on televised entertainment is a strong negative predictor of church attendance, even controlling for religiosity. Among equally religious people, those who report that TV is their primary form of entertainment attend church substantially less often.11

The civic differences between the two groups are crystallized in figure 66: TV minimalists report more than three community projects a year and fewer than half that many instances in which they gave the finger to another driver. Among TV maximalists, this civility ratio is exactly reversed—twice as many rude gestures as community projects. Machers, schmoozers, and those who are simply civil are drawn disproportionately from the minority of Americans who are TV minimalists.

One can discover niches of resistance to TV dependency, but even there one can detect traces of its disengaging aura. Take, for example, well-educated, financially comfortable women from the Northeast in their thirties and early forties—the single demographic category in the nation most likely to disavow televised entertainment. Even in this select group, more than one in four confess that television is their primary leisure activity. Sure enough, compared with their TV-free sisters, the TV-afflicted volunteer 62 percent less often, go to 37 percent fewer club meetings, attend 27 percent fewer church services and 21 percent fewer dinner parties, entertain at home 20 percent less often, and report 24 percent more dissatisfaction with their lives.12

This negative correlation between television watching and social involvement also appears in time diaries and in surveys from many other countries. Both in this country and abroad, heavy television viewers are (even controlling for other demographic factors) significantly less likely to belong to voluntary associations and to trust other people. As TV ownership and usage spread across populations, it was linked, both in this country and abroad, to reduced contacts with relatives, friends, neighbors. More TV watching meant more time not just at home, but indoors, at the expense of time in the yard, on the street, and visiting in others' homes.13

A dead-on summary of the impact of television on social capital came from a member of the traditional and close-knit Amish community in southeastern Pennsylvania in response to a visiting ethnographer, who had asked how the Amish know which technological inventions to admit and which to shun.

We can almost always tell if a change will bring good or bad tidings. Certain things we definitely do not want, like the television and the radio.
They would destroy our visiting practices. We would stay at home with
the television or radio rather than meet with other people. The visiting
practices are important because of the closeness of the people. How can
we care for the neighbor if we do not visit them or know what is going on
in their lives? 

So far we have discovered that television watching and especially dependence
upon television for entertainment are closely correlated with civic disengage-
ment. Correlation, however, does not prove causation. An alternative inter-
pretation is this: People who are social isolates to begin with gravitate toward the
tube as the line of leisurely least resistance. Without true experimental evi-
dence—in which randomly selected individuals are exposed (or not exposed)
to television over long periods of time—we cannot be sure that television itself
is the cause of disengagement. (Since the putative effects of TV presumably
build up over years, a few minutes' viewing in a university lab is unlikely to
replicate the deeper effects that we're talking about here.)

Truly conclusive evidence on this crucial point is not at hand, and given
ethical restrictions on human experimentation, it is not likely to be available
any time soon. (It is hard to know whether the louder public outcry against
such an experiment would come on behalf of subjects forced to watch TV or
those forced not to watch.) On the other hand, several sorts of evidence make
the attribution of guilt in this case more plausible. First, the epidemic of civic
disengagement began little more than a decade after the widespread availabil-
ity of television. Moreover, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 14, the
greater the youthful exposure of any cohort of individuals to television, the
greater their degree of disengagement today. We have already noted that
younger generations, exposed to television throughout their lives, are more hab-
ittal in their television usage and that habitual usage in turn is associated
with lesser civic engagement.

Strikingly direct evidence about the causal direction comes from a range
of intriguing studies of communities conducted just before and just after televi-
sion was introduced. The most remarkable of these studies emerged from three
isolated communities in northern Canada in the 1970s. Owing only to poor
reception, residents of one (given the pseudonym Notel by the researchers)
were without television as the study began. The "treatment" whose effects were
observed was the introduction of a single channel to Notel residents—the
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Life in Notel was compared with
that of two other communities, Unitel and Multitel. Though it was very similar
to Notel in other respects, during the two years of the study TV reception in
Unitel went from CBC only to CBC plus the three American commercial net-
works. Multitel was similar in all relevant respects to the other two towns, al-
though removed somewhat geographically. Residents of Multitel could receive all four channels throughout the span of the research.

Canadian researcher Tannis MacBeth Williams and her colleagues explained why this triad of towns constituted a true experiment:

Except for anachronistically lacking television reception in 1973, [Notel] was typical. It was accessible by road, had daily bus service in two directions, and its ethnic mix was not unusual. The town just happened to be located in a valley in such a way that the transmitter meant to serve the area did not provide television reception for most residents. 36

Significant also is the fact that this study was conducted before the widespread availability of VCRs and satellite dishes. In other words, there will likely never be another example like this of an essentially TV-free community in an industrialized nation. The results clearly showed that the introduction of television deflated Notel residents’ participation in community activities. As the researchers report succinctly,

Before Notel had television, residents in the longitudinal sample attended a greater variety of club and other meetings than did residents of both Unitel and Multitel, who did not differ. There was a significant decline in Notel following the introduction of television, but no change in either Unitel or Multitel. 37

The researchers also asked whether television affected only those who were peripherally involved in community activities or also the active leaders. Their conclusion:

Television apparently affects participation in community activities for individuals who are central to those activities, not just those who are more peripherally involved. Residents are more likely to be centrally involved in their community’s activities in the absence than in the presence of television. 38

This study strongly suggests that television is not merely a concomitant of lower community involvement, but actually a cause of it. A major effect of television’s arrival was the reduction in participation in social, recreational, and community activities among people of all ages. Television privatizes leisure time.

Comparable though less conclusive evidence comes from studies of the introduction of television in England, South Africa, Scotland, Australia, and the United States. 39 The effects of television on childhood socialization have been hotly debated for more than three decades. The most reasonable conclusion from a welter of sometimes conflicting results appears to be that heavy
television watching probably increases aggressiveness (although perhaps not actual violence), that it probably reduces school achievement, and that it is statistically associated with "psychosocial malfunctioning," although how much of this effect is self-selection and how much causal remains controversial. Heavy television watching by young people is associated with civic ignorance, cynicism, and lessened political involvement in later years, along with reduced academic achievement and lower earnings later in life. In an exhaustive review of this interdisciplinary literature on television's effects on American social life, George Comstock and Haejung Paik conclude that the introduction of television has dampened the degree to which people engage in social activities outside of the home. None of these studies provides entirely unassailable support for the thesis that television viewing causes civic disengagement, but taken together the evidence certainly points in that direction.40

If television does reduce civic engagement, how does it do so? Broadly speaking, there are three possibilities:

- Television competes for scarce time.
- Television has psychological effects that inhibit social participation.
- Specific programmatic content on television undermines civic motivations.

Let's review the evidence for each of these hypotheses.

Even though there are only twenty-four hours in everyone's day, most forms of social and media participation are positively correlated. People who listen to lots of classical music are more likely, not less likely, than others to attend Cubs games. People who engage in do-it-yourself projects around the house are more likely than others to play a lot of volleyball and to do more public speaking. Even within demographically matched groups, people who attend more movies also attend more club meetings, more dinner parties, more church services, and more public gatherings, give more blood, and visit with friends more often. More than thirty years ago social psychologist Rolf Meier-Sohn noted this pattern in our leisure activities and dubbed it simply "the more, the more."41

Television is, as Meyersohn observed, the principal exception to this generalization—the only leisure activity that seems to inhibit participation in other leisure activities. TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home, especially social gatherings and informal conversations. The major casualties of increased TV viewing, according to time diaries, are religious participation, social visiting, shopping, parties, sports, and organizational participation. The only activities positively linked to heavy television watching are sleeping, resting, eating, housework, radio listening, and hobbies. Television viewers are anchored at home, and they recognize that fact themselves: heavy viewers generally agree that "I am a homebody," whereas
most light viewers don't. Political scientists John Brehm and Wendy Rahn found that TV watching has such a powerful impact on civic engagement that one hour less daily viewing is the civic-vitamin equivalent of five or six more years of education. There is reason to believe that the displacement effects of television watching may be even more significant with respect to unstructured activities, such as hanging out with friends, than with respect to more formal activities, such as organizational meetings.\(^{42}\) In short, more time for TV means less time for social life.

Several times throughout the 1970s, just as (we now know) our national civic disengagement was gathering steam, the Roper organization asked Americans how their allocation of time and energy had changed in the recent years. Two broad conclusions emerged. First, as figure 67 shows, we massively shifted toward home-based activities (especially watching TV) and away from socializing outside the home. For example, 47 percent of all Americans reported that they were watching more TV than in the past, compared with only 16 percent who said they were watching less TV, for a net increase of 31 percent. Conversely, only 11 percent said they were spending more time than in the past visiting friends and relatives who did not live "quite nearby," as compared with 38 percent who said they were spending less time in that sort of socializing, for a net decrease of 27 percent. Almost without exception, activities outside the home were fading, while activities at home (especially watching TV) were increasing.\(^ {43}\)

Second, those who said they were spending more time watching TV than in the past were significantly less likely to attend public meetings, to serve in local organizations, to sign petitions, and the like than demographically matched people who said they were spending less time on TV. By contrast, the minority of people who reported spending more time with friends than in the past were also more likely to take part in civic life, even when compared with demographically identical groups.\(^ {44}\) The link between increased television watching and decreased civic engagement at that crucial juncture is unusually clear.

If TV steals time, it also seems to encourage lethargy and passivity. Time researchers Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used an ingenious method to track our use of time and its effects on our psychic well-being.\(^ {45}\) They persuaded subjects to carry beepers with them around the clock for a week, and when the beepers were randomly triggered, the subjects wrote down what they were doing and how they felt. Television viewing, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi found, is a relaxing, low-concentration activity. Viewers feel passive and less alert after watching. On heavy-viewing evenings, people are also likely to engage in other low-energy, even slothful activities, whereas on light-viewing evenings, the same people spent more time outside the home in activ-
Figure 67: Americans Began Cocooning in the 1970s

Heavy viewers spend more time with TV, but find it is less rewarding. . . . Although . . . feeling badly in unstructured and solitary time leads to the use of television, . . . heavy viewing and the rapid montage of much contemporary television may also help reinforce an intolerance in the heavy viewer for daily moments that are not similarly choked full of sight and sound. . . . It seems likely that heavy viewing helps perpetuate itself. Some television viewers grow dependent on the ordered stimuli of television or similar entertainments and become increasingly incapable of filling leisure time without external aids.46

Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi report that these psychological concomitants of television watching are common in many cultures. British social psychologist Michael Argyle found that TV induces an emotional state best
described as "relaxed, drowsy, and passive." British researchers Sue Bowden and Avner Offer report:

Television is the cheapest and least demanding way of averting boredom. Studies of television find that of all household activities, television requires the lowest level of concentration, alertness, challenge, and skill. Activation rates while viewing are very low, and viewing is experienced as a relaxing release of tension. Metabolic rates appear to plunge while children are watching TV, helping them to gain weight.47

As Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi conclude, television is surely habit-forming and may be mildly addictive. In experimental studies viewers generally demand a major bribe to give it up, even though viewers consistently report that television viewing is less satisfying than other leisure activities and even than work. In 1977 the Detroit Free Press was able to find only 5 out of 120 families willing to give up television for a month in return for $500. People who do give up TV reportedly experience boredom, anxiety, irritation, and depression. One woman observed, "It was terrible. We did nothing—my husband and I talked."48

As with other addictions, conclude Bowden and Offer,

viewers are prone to habituation, desensitization, and satiation... A researcher reported in 1989 that "virtually everyone in the television industry ardently believes that the audience attention span is growing shorter, and that to hold the audience, television editing must be even faster paced and present more and more exciting visual material."... As consumers become accustomed to the new forms of stimulation, they require an ever stronger dose.49

Although not immediately relevant to our central concern with civic engagement and social capital, self-avowed dependence on television for entertainment turns out to be correlated with a surprisingly wide range of physical and psychological ills. The DDB Needham Life Style surveys happen to include self-reports on headaches, indigestion, and sleeplessness. (Since the research was originally designed, among other things, to assist pharmaceutical marketers, it is not surprising that these measures were included.) We combined these three reports into a single index of "malaise"—people who score high on this measure are frequent victims of headaches, stomachaches, and insomnia. Figure 68 shows that malaise is closely associated with dependence on televised entertainment.50

As always, we checked to see whether this unexpectedly strong correlation might be spurious—perhaps people in poor physical or financial shape have more headaches and also watch more TV. However, among several dozen po-
potential predictors of malaise (including self-described physical health, financial anxiety, frequency of exercise, use of cigarettes, religiosity, various forms of social connectedness, and all standard demographic characteristics), the top four, far above all other factors, turned out to be physical health, financial insecurity, low education (a proxy for social class), and TV dependence. Not surprisingly, physical health was the strongest predictor of malaise, but the other three were essentially equal in predictive power. In other words, TV dependence is as disruptive to one’s constitution as financial anxiety and class deprivation. Without experimental research, we cannot prove which way the causal arrow points, but it is not obvious why people with a headache would disproportionately seek solace in TV. (We shall see later some evidence that generational differences are implicated here as well.) But whichever causes what, it is not a little distressing that by the end of the twentieth century more than half of all Americans said that TV was their primary form of entertainment.

Like other addictive or compulsive behaviors, television seems to be a surprisingly unsatisfying experience. Both time diaries and the “beeper” studies find that for the average viewer television is about as enjoyable as housework and cooking, ranking well below all other leisure activities and indeed below work itself. TV’s dominance in our lives reflects not its sublime pleasures, but its minimal costs. Time researchers John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey conclude:
Much of television’s attraction is that it is ubiquitous and undemanding. As an activity, television viewing requires no advance planning, costs next to nothing, requires no physical effort, seldom shocks or surprises, and can be done in the comfort of one’s own home.12

Another reason that television viewing is so negatively linked to social connectedness may be that it provides a kind of pseudopersonal connection to others. Anyone who has encountered a television personality face-to-face knows the powerful feeling that you already know this person. The daily cheer of morning anchors or the weekly drama of well-loved characters reassures us that we know these people, care about them, are involved in their lives—and no doubt they reciprocate those feelings (or so we subconsciously feel).

Communications theorist Joshua Meyrowitz notes that the electronic media allow social ties to be divorced from physical encounters. “Electronic media create ties and associations that compete with those formed through live interaction in specific locations. Live encounters are certainly more ‘special’ and provide stronger and deeper relationships, but their relative number is decreasing.” Political communications specialist Roderick Hart argues that television as a medium creates a false sense of companionship, making people feel intimate, informed, clever, busy, and important. The result is a kind of “remote-control politics,” in which we as viewers feel engaged with our community without the effort of actually being engaged.53 Like junk food, TV, especially TV entertainment, satisfies cravings without real nourishment.

By making us aware of every social and personal problem imaginable, television also makes us less likely to do anything about it. “When the problems of all others become relatively equal in their seeming urgency,” Meyrowitz notes, “it is not surprising that many people turn to take care of ‘number one.’” In a similar vein, political scientist Shanlo Iyengar has shown experimentally that prevailing television coverage of problems such as poverty leads viewers to attribute those problems to individual rather than societal failings and thus to shirk our own responsibility for helping to solve them. Political scientist Allan McBride showed in a careful content analysis of the most popular TV programs that “television programs erode social and political capital by concentrating on characters and stories that portray a way of life that weakens group attachments and social/political commitment.” Television purveys a disarmingly direct and personal view of world events in a setting dominated by entertainment values. Television privileges personalities over issues and communities of interest over communities of place. In sum, television viewing may be so strongly linked to civic disengagement because of the psychological impact of the medium itself.54
Perhaps, too, the message—in other words, the specific programmatic content—is also responsible for TV's apparent anticivic effects. The DDB Needham Life Style surveys allow us to explore this possibility because, in addition to questions about social connectedness and civic involvement, the surveys elicit information about which specific programs the respondents "watch because you really like it." While causality is impossible to extract from such evidence, we can construct a rough-and-ready ranking of which programs attract and/or create the most civic and least civic audiences.

At the top of the pro-civic hierarchy (controlling, as always, for standard demographic characteristics, such as age and social class) are news programs and educational television. In the late 1990s the audiences for programs like the network news and public affairs presentations, NewsHour and other PBS shows, were generally more engaged in community life than other Americans, in part because these audiences tended to avoid other TV fare. At the other end of the scale fell action dramas (exemplified in an earlier era by The Dukes of Hazzard and Miami Vice), soap operas (such as Dallas and Melrose Place), and so-called reality TV (such as America's Most Wanted and A Current Affair).39

One way of gauging the impact of different types of programming on civic engagement (as distinct from simply the amount of time spent before the tube) is to compare the effects of increasing doses of news programs and of daytime TV, controlling not only for education, income, sex, age, race, employment and marital status, and the like, but also for the total time spent watching TV. As figure 69 shows, the more time spent watching news, the more active one is in the community, whereas the more time spent watching soap operas, game shows, and talk shows, the less active one is in the community.40 In other words, even among people who spend the same number of hours watching TV, what they watch is closely correlated with how active they are in community life.

The clear distinction between the NewsHour audience and the Jerry Springer Show audience underscores the fact that not all television is antisocial. Experimental research has shown that pro-social programming can have pro-social effects, such as encouraging altruism.41 Moreover, television (especially, but not only, public affairs programming) can sometimes reinforce a wider sense of community by communicating a common experience to the entire nation, such as happened in the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion, and the Oklahoma City bombing. These were shared national experiences only because television brought the same painful images into our homes. Television at its civic best can be a gathering place, a powerful force for bridging social differences, nurturing solidarity, and communicating essential civic information.

To this list of shared experiences, however, we must add the deaths of
Diana and JFK Jr. and the O.J. trial, all of which purveyed more melodrama than civic enlightenment. The bonds nurtured by these common experiences are psychologically compelling, as virtually all of us can testify. But they are generally not sociologically compelling, in the sense of leading to action. Each episode is captivating, but few lead to enduring changes in the way we behave or connect. Child psychologists speak of a fairly primitive stage of social development called “parallel play”—two kids in a sandbox, each playing with a toy but not really interacting with each other. In healthy development children outgrow parallel play. But the public spectacles of television leave us at that arrested stage of development, rarely moving beyond parallel attentiveness to the same external stimulus.

Television “in the wild,” so to speak, is represented mostly by programs that are empirically linked to civic disengagement. Those program types that are most closely associated with civic isolation constitute a massive and growing share of television programming. “Target marketing” and the advent of five-hundred-channel cable TV portend a further fragmentation of audiences along lines of social, economic, and personal interest. According to Nielsen Media Research, the number of channels received by the average household soared from nineteen in 1985 to forty-nine in 1997 and continues to rise. The ability of television to create a single national “water-cooler” culture has
shrunk, as fewer and fewer of us watch common programs. In the early 1950s two-thirds of all Americans tuned in and watched the top-rated program (I Love Lucy); in the early 1970s the top-rated program (All in the Family) drew about half of the national TV audience; by the mid-1990s the audience share of ER and Seinfeld was barely one-third. This trend toward market segmentation provides choice and presumably thus enhances consumer satisfaction, but it also undercut's TV's once vaunted role in bringing us together.

Another probable effect of television (not just programming, but also the associated advertising) is its encouragement of materialist values. For example, according to media researcher George Gerbner and his colleagues, heavy-viewing adolescents "were more likely to want high status jobs that would give them a chance to earn a lot of money but also wanted to have their jobs be relatively easy with long vacations and time to do other things." As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, materialism among college freshmen has risen notably during the era of maximum television exposure, and while in college, students who watch more television become even more materialistic, compared with their fellow students who watch less TV or none at all.

In sum, the rise of electronic communications and entertainment is one of the most powerful social trends of the twentieth century. In important respects this revolution has lightened our souls and enlightened our minds, but it has also rendered our leisure more private and passive. More and more of our time and money are spent on goods and services consumed individually, rather than those consumed collectively. Americans' leisure time can increasingly be measured—as do strategic marketers—in terms of "eyeballs," since watching things (especially electronic screens) occupies more and more of our time, while doing things (especially with other people) occupies less and less. This emphasis on visual entertainment seems to be especially common among the generations who have been reared in the last several decades. Watching TV, videos, and computer windows onto cyberspace is ever more common. Sharing communal activities is ever less so.

The apotheosis of these trends can be found, most improbably, at the Holiday Bowling Lanes in New London, Connecticut. Mounted above each lane is a giant television screen displaying the evening's TV fare. Even on a full night of league play team members are no longer in lively conversation with one another about the day's events, public and private. Instead each stares silently at the screen while awaiting his or her turn. Even while bowling together, they are watching alone.

The effects of these new technologies on Americans' worldview are most marked among the younger generations. Social critic Sven Birkerts emphasizes the historical rupture that the introduction of television signaled:

There is a ledge, a threshold, a point after which everything is different. I would draw the line, imprecisely, somewhere in the 1950s. That was
when television worked its way into the fabric of American life, when we grew accustomed to the idea of parallel realities—the one that we lived in, the other that we stepped into whenever we wanted a break from our living. People born after the mid-1950s are the carriers of the new; they make up the force that will push us out of our already-fading rural/small-town/urban understanding of social organization. The momentum of change has already made those designations all but meaningless.62

Americans at the end of the twentieth century were watching more TV, watching it more habitually, more pervasively, and more often alone, and watching more programs that were associated specifically with civic disengagement (entertainment, as distinct from news). The onset of these trends coincided exactly with the national decline in social connectedness, and the trends were most marked among the younger generations that are (as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter) distinctively disengaged. Moreover, it is precisely those Americans most marked by this dependence on televised entertainment who were most likely to have dropped out of civic and social life—who spent less time with friends, were less involved in community organizations, and were less likely to participate in public affairs.

The evidence is powerful and circumstantial, though because it does not derive from randomized experiments, it cannot be fully conclusive about the causal effects of television and other forms of electronic entertainment. Heavy users of these new forms of entertainment are certainly isolated, passive, and detached from their communities, but we cannot be entirely certain that they would be more sociable in the absence of television. At the very least, television and its electronic cousins are willing accomplices in the civic mystery we have been unraveling, and more likely than not, they are ringleaders.