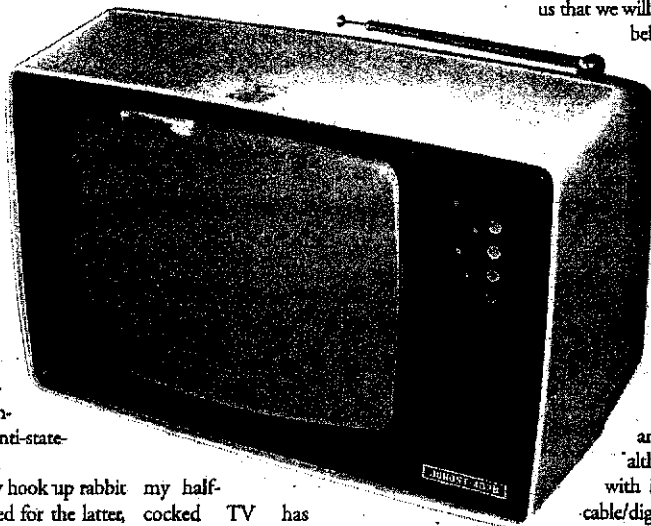


# FOCUS

## Dayton Voices

### The Box (or "A License to Watch")

By Holly Hudson



In technological terms, my TV is ancient. According to the yellowed sticker on the back of the set, it was manufactured during the Reagan years. I inherited it with the lease on my apartment a few months ago and haven't bothered to replace it. I always have to remember to tell babysitters to "bring a book" and mumble apologies for my distinctly anti-state-of-the-art entertainment system.

The set is so old you can only hook up rabbit ears or a VCR, and I have opted for the latter, since without cable I get about two channels and even that's sketchy. I have nothing against TV, but I'm also all too familiar with its addictive tendencies. I know how I feel at the end of a long night in front of the box — slightly drugged, like I've just stuffed myself with a tray of double-fudge brownies.

Depending upon your view of social acceptance, not having a TV (or a working one) is like standing out in the cold and watching the party going on inside. Life is marked by shared visual moments — the weekly news-breaking aerial car chase, Katrina refugees at the stadium, or the horrid spectacles of 9/11. Not to mention the TV shows that characterize a generation — "Happy Days," "MASH," "Thirty Something," "Seinfeld." When even online dating profiles reflect your favorite TV shows, you had better have one. This is clearly the stuff of life, but how much it fills your life is determined by personal preference.

My completely unscientific theory is that you can tell where on the priority list TV plays in someone's life by the size, model and number of household sets. On a recent trip to Best Buy to price out the updating of my situation, I was asked whether I wanted a "bedroom," "family room" or "kitchen" model. I stammered in reply, "I just want a TV — not too big."

Personally, I find the size possibilities daunting. There are those homes where the TV practically knocks you over as soon as you walk in the door, looming over you like the dark eye of an abandoned spacecraft and completely disproportionate.

my half-cocked TV has offered me an experiment that extends to my family. Can I save my child from the negative effects of über-consumerism and violent or sexually explicit material by only allowing the viewing of chosen videos? Or is it the passive act of viewing I should be more worried about? At the moment, I can exercise total parental control over what my child watches and still garner myself a few minutes of space. Let's be frank. Despite experts' admonitions to never use TV as a babysitter, many of us need it, at least to some degree. For those moments when the dinner needs to be cooked, the laundry folded, or you just can't build one more Lincoln Log House at the end of the day, TV can be a useful parenting crutch.

The trick is knowing what and when is enough. Viewing is always a slippery slope and limits can be hard to maintain. A half hour can easily bleed into three, even when broken up over the course of a day. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation's recent "Zero to Six" study, "59 percent [of children] watch television on a typical day for an average of two hours and five minutes. Thirty percent of children zero to three years old and 43 percent of children from four to six years old have televisions in their bedrooms."

With the advent of TVs in vehicles, it's a wonder anyone fits in a conversation anymore. A friend recounted how she accepted an invitation to a family's Thanksgiving dinner last year and that the giant, widescreen plasma TV remained on throughout the entire meal. If our children are watching so much TV it is only because they

enough of that already. The Kaiser study revealed that children who watched more TV made more attempts to influence what was purchased at the store, though most parents don't need a study to tell them that.

Programming is also increasingly aimed at babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, while at the same time national ad campaigns try to convince us that we will somehow be leaving our children behind if they aren't watching "Baby Einstein" videos by the time they're two. It seems that anything I can do to lessen the effects of this onslaught is a small victory for the sanity of both myself and my son.

For a little perspective, in England, it is illegal to own a TV without a TV License. A TV License is basically enforced public television, which would sound absurd to us Americans. For \$160 a year, you can own the privilege of commercial-free programming on any of the four BBC channels, although you will have to put up with it on all the other channels and cable/digital costs are additional.

And don't mess with the TV License Inspectors. They will come knocking on your door and peering in your window to make sure you've paid your license if you own a set. And woe to the family that protests they shouldn't have to pay because they only watch videos or DVDs. Apparently, the BBC finds that too hard to believe and such cases have dragged through British courts for years.

Despite this, British television is every bit as much a wasteland of reality TV programming as America has become. The makers of "Big Brother," a huge reality show that originated in the Netherlands before launching five years ago in the UK, then the U.S., have unveiled the most daring and expensive hoax ever attempted on TV. "Space Cadets," which will feature nine people chosen for their suggestibility, will be convinced that they have travelled into space. The unwitting contestants will actually be grounded at a disused British army base. How the joke plays out is being watched live by millions across the UK this month.

While I miss watching the more mundane "Law & Order" and "CSI," I am on the fence about relinquishing my seat at the controls. Theoretically, as parents, we are always at the controls. But the older and more independent a child becomes, the more resolve it takes to go culturally against the grain. One could argue that depriving your child of pop culture will make fitting in with his or her peers all the more difficult. But with the Parents Television Council reporting a more alarming statistic that kids spend

## News Shorts

### NOT JUST IN THAILAND ANYMORE

Over a dozen men and women from the Toledo area are facing federal charges for allegedly running a child prostitution and pornography ring. Federal investigators say the accused adults were forcing women and girls, some as young as 14, into prostitution, with one girl reportedly being forced into the ring by her grandfather to pay for his crack cocaine. Indictments against the accused, some of whom are still at large, are the result of an investigation that began in 2003, which has identified more than 200 children as victims of the ring.

### CHILDREN OF A LESSER GULF

Ninety-two members of the House of Representatives are proposing a plan that would "re-interpret" the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to no longer recognize children born in the United States as American citizens if their parents are here illegally. Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas), one of the plan's proponents, has said that "Addressing the problem is needed if we're going to combat illegal immigration on all fronts."

### PROGRESSIVE TOO PROGRESSIVE FOR SOME

The American Family Association is urging its supporters to boycott Progressive Insurance, having taken issue with Progressive Chairman Peter Lewis' donation of a reported \$8.5 million to the American Civil Liberties Union. The stop-the-club.org website is sponsoring a petition for opponents of the ACLU to sign, as well as promoting the "Stop the ACLU Banfire Project," in which churches, schools, businesses, etc., are asked to donate any letters they have received from the ACLU for a banfire party on a date yet to be determined.

### CHAVEZ CASTS BREAD ON THE WATER

The government of Venezuela has promised to begin selling heating oil at greatly reduced prices through its Orpete subsidiary to impoverished neighborhoods in New York and Boston. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has been open in his criticism of the Bush administration's failure to do more for Americans living in poverty, a criticism that earned Chavez the wrath of televangelist Pat Robertson, who was implored to apologize after remarking on television last August that the U.S. should arrange for Chavez to be assassinated.

### MEANWHILE, DOWN THE STREET...

The presidential election in Bolivia last Sunday saw victory for socialist candidate Evo Morales, a longtime supporter of his country's coca farmers whose livelihoods have been ruined by anti-drug campaigns geared toward the eradication of cocaine production. Morales gave a press conference