

## I Am a VCR: The Impact of Television and Media on One of the Finest Minds in Western Civilization

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I KNOW everybody is expecting me to speak about Marshall McLuhan. My impact on his work. My understanding. How I came to the conclusion that the invention of lasagna led to the Pullman sleeping car and other insights.

But today I am speaking about something even closer to my heart, a subject of which I have an even more profound understanding, myself. The impact of media ecology. More specifically, on one of the greatest minds in Western civilization. Which I had before I became a TV critic.

Before I go on, I want to apologize in advance for the discursive nature of my remarks. My attention span has grown shorter for some reason. Every eight minutes or so, my mind starts to wander. I get the urge to go to the bathroom or go out and buy something. The same thing educators have observed happens to young children who watch TV. Does it have any connection with my problem?

It's too quiet standing here. Where is the sound track? I need music to tell me when something important is said. How can I tell when a bad person is sitting down in the audience or a crisis is about to occur in this speech without the bongos and synthesizers up?

Even worse, how can I tell when something I said is funny? There is no laugh track.

In researching this talk, I asked my editorial assistant, a proud graduate of the Fordham media ecology department,<sup>2</sup> what is media ecology? "We used to joke about that at Fordham," she explained. "All the grad students in the communication department wanted to know. Nobody there we could ask." What it is, she finally said, when I pressed her, is a bunch of professors get together and try to sell each other their books.

It is a mystery to grad students, but even more of a mystery to me.

They are not media watchdogs, I have since been told. You do that as a TV critic. They critique thinking about media theories. The why, not the what.

What I'm going to talk about tonight is the impact of the media on one of the finest minds in Western civilization, which as I have said, you know, I used to have before I became a TV Critic at *Newsday* 33 years ago.

I still remember the day: December 7, 1969. A day that will live in infamy as far as the TV networks are concerned.

In my years on duty, TV has become the dominant center of everyone's universe. The sun in our universe. We all revolve around the set. The world. The most powerful medium. If it is the great American metaphor, as Marshall McLuhan actually said, then I am a metaphor for what has happened. I've been called far worse than a metaphor.

I am qualified to come to you and talk about this subject because I am currently living through the most important developmental period of the medium. The '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s are pretty important, too. They were the periods of most change in the viewing habits and, most important, TV executives. The people who make choices in the programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: The Department of Communication and Media Studies

They are the reason why we don't have great programs like *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* in drama and certainly in comedy—no *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Bob Newhart*, *All in the Family*. These shows were all on one night in the '70s. It is all because of the impact of TV on program makers. They are the younger generations, those who grew up in the '70s and '80s.

So who are the younger ones who have replaced them today? Whose brains may have been fried at birth?

In the 1990s, we went from *Cheers* to *Seinfeld* to 29 clones of *Friends*. One cannot ignore the impact of cocaine on TV programming. Things seem funny when you're on cocaine compared to when you're not on cocaine. The programming system would work fine if we were all given free cocaine with TV sets, I'm told. Somebody should get a foundation grant to study the relationship between comedies that aren't funny and so-called Nasal Humor.

It's not just the program executives. I myself have been so warped by the medium I can predict the programs in advance. I know there will be *Survivor 9*. And even worse: I am looking forward to it.

I have been able to predict each new season with startling accuracy. The comedies won't be funny. The dramas will be repetitive, if not trite. The shows I like will be canceled. At best, there will be one new idea, but that only happens once in a while. There is a small window of opportunity in the air that opens. It's like a space shot. Like an *All in the Family* in 1971 or a *Hill Street Blues* in 1981. Like seeing the Comet Keokuk.<sup>3</sup> The great new show has missed us lately. But there will be another passage—perhaps in the year 2009.

**R**oss Perot, my favorite TV politician, said during the 1992 campaign, "I don't want to live in a country that doesn't make its own TV sets."

But we do live in a country made by TV. The brilliance and the blindness, the numbness it causes, the new values and the no-values we have absorbed since the advent of commercial TV—that rising sun in our living rooms.

Let me pause and rewind here. Some historical background on the subject of tonight's talk. I did not watch TV until I got paid to do it.

I grew up in the 1950s when all the educators, social scientists, scholars such as yourself were warning that TV could damage the mind before the damage of which I am about to speak affected you.

I was a freelance writer. As a writer, the most important thing I had, next to fingers I needed for typing, was my mind. Once I had a steel-trap mind. Today, thanks to TV, it's a steel sieve. Some people have photographic minds, total memory, or, as Oscar Levant called it, "total recoil." I have total forgetfulness.

This is not a negative. This is a defense mechanism. If I remembered every plot of *Yes, Dear* or *Laverne & Shirley*, I'd wake up screaming every night. It is essential to sanity to not remember. Do you know what it is like to have some 13-year-old punk write in and call you an idiot for not remembering that the script you praised in David Kelley's *Snoops* was the same premise he used in *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*?

As salubrious as is memory loss, it really gives one pause when somebody asks what time the Six-Thirty News With Peter Jennings goes on.

Watching TV is causing us to gradually lose a few minor faculties such as word recognition. I remember in the 1980s a writing teacher at East Stroudsburg State Teacher's College conducted

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: Perhaps a play on words with Comet Kohoutek

an analysis of eight *Charlie's Angels* scripts and discovered that out of 5,312 words in the average hour-long program, there were only 1,000 discrete words. The others were discrete sounds such as grunts. The eight shows together used a vocabulary of 3,350 words, about that of a child entering school in the first grade. So much for those who say TV isn't an educational tool. Those kids know more words than your average chimpanzee.

But, hey, it's not just great literature that's being affected. I was reading in *The New York Times* the results of a national history test for high school students. On last year's national history test, only 25 percent of seniors taking the test knew when the Civil War happened. They divided the 200-year history of the country into four quadrants and only 25 percent picked the right one for the war. Cool.

My neighbor, Professor Emeritus Marshall Hurwitz of the Department of Classical Languages and Hebrew at City College of New York, thinks it is all of us, not just me. He got a paper last year from a student in mythology discussing the significance of "Jason and the Golden Fleas," as if they were a rock group.

Even at my newspaper, I once wrote a column mentioning Scheherazade and called the research department to check the spelling. And the young person asked me, "Do you have a first name on that?"

It's awesome the way we are losing our faculties, and I don't mean reduction of staff at colleges, since the start of the electronic era of communication.

**I** DON'T want to alarm anybody, but have you considered the possibility that we might be mutating as a result of all this TV? Biologically I know, my kidneys are not the same. I can no longer sit and watch an entire movie through without commercials when I go to the Tenplex.

As our kidneys shrink, our stomachs grow. How else can you explain the need to nosh so often while watching TV?

The next development is bigger eyeballs the size of cantaloupes. As Fred Allen used to predict, to go with brains the size of peas. But what did Allen know? He also said those people on the screen in the musical variety show that replaced his comedy show, *The Fred Allen Show*, in the late 1940's were a special tribe of pygmies who went from channel to channel. To this day some older people, not high tech, think that little people enter the TV set from the rear while not watching. Not me.

I'm no authority on science. Hell, I thought a chromosome was Zenith's new TV set. But who is to say one day little antennae will not grow on the sides of the head? When was the last time you checked for bumps?

Forget physicality. My mind has definitely been altered. I used to read a lot. But now I only read during the commercials. I've been reading *War and Peace* since 1970.

I have become virtually illiterate. What an incredible achievement. The de-learning curve has been remarkable. Without meaning to be boastful, I have gone beyond literacy to a higher level of development. I am today an audiovisual person.

Every day I began noticing how powerful the medium was. I was living proof of the impact TV has on people. What was I saying again? Excuse me, I forgot.

You see I have difficulty finishing a thought. If a problem isn't resolved in sixty minutes, thirty minutes, thirty seconds, now fifteen seconds, I lose patience with it.

My mind keeps pausing. Rewinding. Fast forwarding. It's almost as if a third force, an alien being, was controlling me. Starting and stopping me as if somebody was turning me on and off. A *Manchurian Candidate*-type thing.

This was a case for Mulder and Scully on *The X-Files*. Until I figured out what had happened.

I had turned into a VCR.

As a video recorder, I immediately had my first identity crisis as a writer. Was I JVC? Or a Panasonic? Or a Sony?

It was, like they say in L.A., awesome. Somehow unbeknownst to me, I had become a machine. Like Gregor What's-his-face in Kafka's "Metamorphosis," who woke up one morning to find he was a cockroach.

The sum of life was stored as bits and pieces. Snatches of television. The black-and-white matter of my brain and the color, too. Where gray matter used to be. I had become the living personification of my worst nightmare, the evils of TV.

Suddenly, I realized, as Descartes said, "I am what I see on TV."

Excuse my hitting the pause button here. Coincidentally, the name of my first volume of my autobiography, my first twenty years as a TV critic, is, amazingly, "I am a VCR."

Interestingly, TV viewers who are readers – an oxymoron—did not get that the title was inspired by *I Am a Camera*, by Christopher Isherwood, which was a play, a movie, and a musical called *Cabaret*.

Presumably, the same thing will happen to my book. I am often ahead of my times...by five minutes.

Culture is changing. In Chicago's newspapers, they can't use the word "culture" anymore. Culture is known as "lively arts." In contrast to what? Deadly arts?

But I digress again. As a VCR, I noticed it was as if a cassette had been inserted into my brain. A continuous tape, a compilation of everything experienced in television. Characters in long-forgotten tacky commercials like Fred the Furrier or the two old gents from Bartles & James, the president of the Hair Club For Men are as memorable as The Fonz in *Happy Days* or Joe Mannix in *Mannix*.

But on the downside, you could forget things. By taking the cassette out, you could no longer think about the Afghan War. When was the last time you thought about whatever happened to Osama bin Laden? I saw him pumping gas in Wayne, New Jersey, last week.

But they didn't believe me.

**W**HEN I think about all the ways TV has impacted a great mind, I am thrilled when I'm not being appalled. I think of all the great things that have happened. Amazing. Awesome.

When I started, people used to complain about the commercials. It's the programs they complain about now. Often commercials are more interesting.

I was the first critic to advocate that newspapers list commercial schedules instead of programs, which they moved around so much anyway.

I wanted to know when the Ikea commercial with the crazy German guy was on. Or the one with the Italian women in the polka dot dresses who are dancing the tarantella for joy because modern science finally came up with plastic that won't get stained when you put red sauce in it.

I don't remember what they were advertising—one of the problems with clutter. Madison Avenue should look into it some day when they are analyzing poor sales results when they stop using cocaine.

When I think of all I had to endure during my 33 years of servitude. I mean, cultural enrichments.

All that sex and violence. I am lucky I didn't become a homicidal maniac.

I have seen so many law shows I should be able to get a law degree. In the old days a person could become a lawyer by reading the law. Back in the days of Perry Mason, you could get an LLD. by watching a certain number of hours. The modern TV equivalent is watching *Law & Order* reruns which are on cable as often as weather and sports on the news shows. Or at least become a bailiff in the court.

I have seen so many medical shows, I could do emergency home brain surgery in a pinch. Be glad you're not around me when you get sick.

And of course, I could be a private eye, should I ever retire from my important work as a TV critic, of which there is no chance, in case any of you are having a midlife crisis and want to do something useful with your life, like becoming a TV critic.

Watching TV has taught me so much about human experience. I can still remember how I expected my wife to clean the house with the speed of Lindsay Wagner at the start of each episode of *The Bionic Woman*. I also learned how to jog by watching *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

As I lie on the beach, the sun bringing to a boil the vegetable oil in my brain, I start remembering what I had gone through all those years. How I actually cared who shot J.R. and it was only a dream that Bobby had died. Or whether a great actress like Joan Collins should have to take time off from *Dynasty* to pose nude for *Playboy*.

I've gone through various periods, as if I've been on some kind of drug. There was the time I imagined I was one of the Greek gods, Sisyphus, who had been sentenced to go up on the hill with a TV set tied around his neck. A metaphor for my life as a critic trying to make TV better in this condition which I have been describing so clinically.

I've done a lot of strange things over the years. I was the one who conducted the scholarly study of etymology to answer the question, "What is Columbo's first name?" I discovered it was "Lt," as in "Lieutenant." It's an old Herzegovina name, like the WASP "Sergeant" Shriver.

Other times, I thought I wanted to become a network president. You may remember my campaign slogan, "I'd rather be president than write." To keep my options open, I was running at all four leading networks at the same time. Why not a critic leading a network?

For years, I have been telling them what is wrong and how to fix it. And for years, they had not listened. No more Mr. Nice Guy.

I was more qualified than some of those other idiots. My opponents such as Jamie Tarses at ABC, Doug Herzog at Fox, Dean Valentine at UPN already dropped out of the race. I'm sure it was just a coincidence.

But I snapped out of it. My ultimate goal, I can now admit, was to give it all up and buy a TV station. Which, as Lord Thomson first observed, is a license to print money.

My plan now is to pool my IRA money with my old friend, Ted Turner, and buy a duopoly. A duopoly, you should know, has nothing to do with a cappella singers from South Philadelphia. It is a situation where one person or entity owns two stations in the same broadcasting market. Like Rupert Murdoch in New York, 9 and 11. Thanks to Michael Powell of the FCC, you can own a triopoly as well as eight radio stations and a newspaper in the same market. It's all in the name of diversity.

But that might be a little over my head.

I WANT to leave you with a positive thought. Since I can't think of any, here are two negatives: Watch out. You too, can become a VCR. And finally, I thought of some advice. The answer, my friends, is organics. Get into organics. Everything around my neighborhood is organic. My neighbor is painting his home with organic paint. What we need now are organic TV sets.

I think it was Marshall McLuhan who said the invention of TV made possible organic gas.

Someday, they will be selling organic gas at your local filling station. It will be the fourth pump next to the diesel. And they will charge extra for the organic gas.

Thank you for inviting me.