The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor

Questioning the "Plug-In Drug" and a TV-Free America

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On 30 April 1997, more than 32 million Americans watched *Ellen*, witnessing television history as Ellen Morgan became television's first openly homosexual leading character. Amid the controversy and protests, one group of more than four million Americans actively refused to watch the much-hyped episode as part of a nationwide protest. This specific movement, however, was not protesting the program's representations of sexuality nor reacting to any perceived immoral content within the episode. Rather, the boycott of *Ellen* was a byproduct of a larger protest against the medium of television itself, as an organization called TV-Free America sponsored its third annual TV-Turnoff Week, coincidentally concluding the day after Ellen's coming-out party. Founded in 1994, TV-Free America "encourages Americans to reduce, voluntarily and dramatically, the amount of television they watch in order to promote richer, healthier, and more connected lives, families, and communities."[1] This organization promotes its philosophy of television reduction primarily by sponsoring the National TV-Turnoff Week, encouraging Americans to go without television for one week at the end of each April. These weeks are locally organized through schools, libraries, community councils, and city governments, and they seem to be quite successful, adding approximately one million participants in each successive year; TV-Free America boasts that more than eighteen million people have participated in these weeks since 1995. The TV-Turnoff Week approach has been attempted in various local incarnations since 1974, but TV-Free America has made their focus national. TV-Free America also provides resources and literature advo-

TELEVISION & NEW MEDIA
Vol. 1 No. 2, May 2000 215–238

cating the reduction and elimination of television from the lives of Americans, circulating their information via newsletters, press releases, a Web site, letters to editors of newspapers and magazines, and editorials written by high-profile members of their advisory board. Although TV-Free America's stated goal of rich and healthy lives is not controversial, we must step back and carefully consider how television is being defined and accepted as a social problem through the circulation of this anti-television discourse.

Television has always been a site and subject of contested knowledges. Lynn Spigel (1992) has detailed how the introduction of television prompted discussions of the medium's proper role within the domestic sphere, leading to competing conceptualizations of television's cultural function and meanings. After fifty years, American society still has not settled these debates over the meanings of television within our everyday lives, even as the medium has become ubiquitous and omnipresent. Although the meanings of television are not clearly defined or determined, some meanings have more cultural resonance and acceptance than others. For example, television is generally defined as inferior within cultural hierarchies, lacking cultural capital when compared to books, theater, film, music, newspapers, and many other forms of culture. This set of meanings is certainly active within the TV-Turn Off movement, as TV-Free America's letterhead and Web site suggest many options implied to be culturally superior to watching television, such as "Go dancing," "Read a short story," and "Listen to music." While the definition of television as low culture is certainly a powerful and prevalent discourse throughout the anti-television movement, it cannot explain how television can be defined as a social problem worthy of a grassroots movement dedicated to its eradication.

Other active discourses within the anti-television movement cannot account for the vehemence with which authors such as Marie Winn condemn television. Winn, as well as others involved in the anti-television movement, espouses rhetoric praising various other activities besides television, such as education, exercise, reading, and creativity. While these alternatives to television run throughout these writings, this movement is defined less around what it is *for* than what it is strongly *against*—television itself. There are many proreading, exercise, education, and other advocacy groups, but TV-Free America stands distinct from these movements in defining its object of focus as a negative social problem. Likewise, many of these authors frame their critique of television within sentimental nostalgia for a pre-televisual era, when families were happy, children read and played peacefully, and communities were tight-knit and crime-free. Other scholars have discussed how these nostalgic images of the past are tainted myths (Coontz 1992); for my purposes here, suffice it to say that such

cultural nostalgia is not sufficient to mobilize a movement to eradicate the primary media form of our society.

The discourse that I argue is central to the anti-television movement, the metaphor that allows television to be viewed as a social problem requiring political action, is that television is a drug. By representing television through the lens of narcotics, groups such as TV-Free America are able to promote television as a public health crisis, requiring social solutions. Through this metaphor, television is understood as having the power to alter the minds of its viewers, causing behavior that would not be fathomable for nonusers. Television is known as potentially addictive, requiring interventions and supportive communities to cope with a viewer's withdrawal and self-denial. The drug metaphor helps frame television as a problem primarily affecting the young, with children as the unwitting victims of a narcotic that can affect their future livelihood. Like drugs, television is located specifically along the axes of race and class, promoting white middle-class fear of a problem that is often articulated with a lower-class non-white identity. Finally, television is known as a drug whose social solution is to be achieved through careful control and potential elimination, as "proper" use is difficult given the volatile nature of the abused substance.

To examine the cultural and social impact of this metaphorical discourse, I will look at a number of primary sources. The literature distributed by TV-Free America, both their own organizational material and additional articles they send out to interested parties, serve as resources to help define the internal logic of the anti-television movement. A number of books are central to this movement, most notably, Marie Winn's *The Plug-In Drug* (1985) and *Unplugging the Plug-In Drug* (1987), Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978), and Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Television and the Quality of Life* (1990). Winn, Mander, Kubey, and Csikszentmihalyi are all listed as members of TV-Free America's Board of Advisors,[2] and these books are all recommended on the organization's Web site.[3] In addition to the material from within the anti-television movement, I will consider articles written about TV-Turn Offs and other definitions of the "TV problem" to note how this discursive terrain extends beyond TV-Free America, permeating nearly all representations of the movement and their anti-television message.

As suggested above, I believe that the metaphorical "plug-in drug" structures delimits the possible meanings of television within our culture. Metaphors have been studied by scholars in a variety of disciplines, looking at how this basic rhetorical device can constitute an understanding of the social world that becomes naturalized as truth (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). I am following Janice Radway's (1986) examination of a similar metaphorical discourse that dominates the conception of cultural reception, looking at the way that reading popular fiction is framed by the metaphor

of "consumption." According to Radway, this metaphor works to equate reading with eating, suggesting that through the process of reading, "mass-produced texts are used up, exhausted, and then discarded by the people who rely upon them" (p. 9). She suggests that this metaphor works to obscure the real processes of reading popular literature: "By taking this metaphor too literally and then by extending its use, we have failed to detect the essential complexity that can characterize the interaction between people and mass-produced culture" (p. 9). The simplicity of the "reading as consumption" metaphor works to convey a number of connotative meanings and assumptions that structure the way we can culturally conceive of the reading process, leading to descriptions of the "predigested gruel" that forms popular literature, the "habit-forming hunger" of popular readers, and "lack of nourishment" contained within the texts (p. 10).

Radway (1986) calls for an awareness and dismantling of this metaphor. Only by displacing these metaphoric assumptions will it be "possible for individuals and groups interested in social change to intervene in mass culture production and to demonstrate to consumers why they ought to take charge of that culture themselves" (p. 8). The political import of denaturalizing this metaphor is central to Radway's project: "When the consumption metaphor is abandoned and industrialized cultural production is reconceptualized as a set of complex social processes, the relationship between people and mass culture loses its unidirectional character" (p. 11). I wish to follow Radway's lead here by working to denaturalize the metaphoric linkage between television and drugs, uncovering the meanings behind this metaphor that mask the complex social processes that can occur through the process of television reception; this may only be accomplished by intervening in the discursive process to fracture the truth claims of this metaphor. Through the repetitive reiteration of this discourse, the metaphor loses its metaphorical status, becoming a naturalized truth. Thus, in Radway's case study, over time, "reading is like consumption" becomes culturally realized as "reading is consumption"; similarly, "television is like a drug" has transformed into "television is a drug." Because "drug" is not an empty signifier, the metaphor brings with it a range of connotative meanings that affect and structure the ways we are able to conceive of television itself.

As the circulation of the "television-as-drug" metaphor is fairly widespread, there is little need to "prove" that such a metaphor exists; the titles of Winn's (1985, 1987) books alone shows how ready we are to accept the articulation of television as a drug. The more important work is to systematically unpack the variety of meanings that are connotatively conveyed by linking television to drugs and point to the material effects that this conceptual equation has had for our social understanding of television as a medium. Of course, the television-as-drug metaphor is not unique to the

anti-television movement; it helps define our conception of television in a number of spheres of knowledge, including social science media effects research, Marxist social theory such as the Frankfurt School, representations in literature and other media, and protechnology gurus such as Marshall McLuhan. For this article, I will restrict myself to the circulation of the metaphor specifically concerning the anti-television movement, breaking down the discourse into a series of tropes that are conveyed and connoted throughout the movement's writings and press coverage. By calling attention to these associated meanings, hopefully the metaphor will lose its efficacy as truth and allow us to question the claims that the illusion of television as a drug helps solidify.

Before turning to the specific tropes of the TV as drug metaphor, it is important to consider the social context out of which this movement has grown. As I suggested above, this is not a new metaphor; we can see drug-like figurations of television in the medium's earliest history (Spigel 1992, 53). But the specific articulation of the metaphor to a grassroots movement to eliminate television is fairly new. Winn's (1985, 1987) and Mander's (1978) books mark the beginning of this movement, both emerging in the mid-1970s in reaction to what they saw as the overmediation of American life. As the anti-television movement gained momentum throughout the 1980s, numerous factors helped spur its success, including self-critique from aging baby-boomers reflecting on their own media-saturated environment and a general interest in more "natural" and "simple" lifestyles, typified by "back to the land" and communitarian movements.[4] Simultaneous to these cultural shifts, public currency of antidrug movements reached new peaks in the 1980s, driven by the Reagan-Bush war on drugs that dominated media coverage of American social ills. I contend that it is only through an explicit articulation of television to the drug crisis of the 1980s that the anti-television movement has been able to have an impact in contemporary America, driven by the troubling metaphoric association that television is a drug.

The anti-television movement relies on a number of cultural traditions that have been discussed in depth by other scholars. This movement could not exist were it not for the cultural construction of the domestic sphere and realm of the family as a legitimate site of social action and discipline, as the social action called for by the anti-television movement is to be enacted on the familial level (Donzelot 1979). Similarly, the institutions of psychology and medicine have established the behavior of the individual as a site of discipline to affect the social order at large (Foucault 1973, 1978). These traditions of medical discipline and familial policing both work to universalize the assumptions of the anti-television movement, couching the rhetoric of their specific claims in the terms of medical science and "natural" family norms. Various aspects of the media have been analyzed within these larger

traditions as well. Most often, scholars have examined the practices of media consumption and construction of media audiences as a site on which disciplinary power has been applied (Hartley 1992; Ang 1990). My examination of the various discursive tropes mobilized by the anti-television movement draws on these previous studies, looking to map out the continuities between cultural trends. While my analysis is narrow in scope, we need to remember the contextual linkages between the anti-television movement and other modes of disciplinary power to foreground how the television-as-drug metaphor is part of a larger process of cultural politics—less an exception than a particular incarnation of a rule. In mapping out the specific tropes of the "TV-as-drug" discourse, we can see these linkages more clearly, posit the connotative assumptions constituted by the metaphor, and work to denaturalize the truth claims implied by the metaphor.

The TV-Drug as a Public Health Crisis

There is little question that drugs are known in the United States as a public health crisis. Richard Nixon first declared the war on drugs in the early-1970s; the Reagan-Bush administrations escalated this war in the mid- and late-1980s. Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell compellingly chronicle the ways in which Reagan-era policies on cocaine and crack were activated into cultural discourse as problems impacting the health of individual and social bodies (Reeves and Campbell 1994). Throughout the discursive construction of drugs in contemporary America, the media and politicians focus on a number of aspects of the "drug crisis": wide distribution and ease of access, overwhelmingly damaging physiological and psychological effects, linkages to other antisocial and criminal behaviors, and the clear condemnation of drug use from the "official" medical community. We can see all of these factors discursively articulated in the construction of television as a drug as well.

The omnipresence of television is often reiterated throughout its construction as a drug. TV-Free America's newsletter proclaims that "the 1990 U.S. Census figures recorded that 98 percent of American households had television—more households than had indoor plumbing." Winn similarly warns readers about the prevalence of television in American households, citing that "by 1970, 96 percent of the nation's families had now joined the ranks of television watchers" (Winn 1985, 82). TV-Free America further cites the wide reach of television: "seventy percent of households have more than one TV set; 11 percent have four or more." The compulsive reiteration of the statistics of television's presence in everyday life is similar to the media's use of drug statistics as detailed by Reeves and Campbell;

seemingly objective numerical "facts" carry messages of ideological positions and attitudes against television and drugs respectively.

Similar to the omnipresence of televisions themselves, writers in the anti-television movement cite the high rate of television use. The statistical average of four hours of television viewing a day is mentioned in nearly every article and book concerned with television's role. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) warn, "At any given moment on any given evening, well over one third of the people in the United States are watching television" (p. 24). These statistics are nearly always compared to other activities that are seen as more productive: TV-Free America cites "the average American teenager watches more than 21 hours of TV each week but devotes only 5.6 hours a week to homework and a mere 1.8 hours to pleasure reading." An editorial in support of TV-Turn Off Week stated, "The average student spends 900 hours a year in school and 1,500 in front of the television set" ("It's Time" 1996, 14). These statistical fragments are repeated to promote fear and shock, just as statistics on drug use motivate action by creating and mobilizing fear. In both cases, the image of the "heavy user" is mobilized to create anxiety about the "abused substance."

The physiological effects of television use are often speculative but powerful images of self-destruction. Mander (1978) paints a somewhat apocalyptic vision of the internal bodily response to television viewing: "the heartbeat slows to idle, the pulse rate tends to even out, the brainwave patterns go into a smooth and steady rhythm" (p. 165). Winn (1985) looks at the "television generation" (apparently referring to baby boomers) and argues that one of the "symptoms" of television's "influence" is "their mumbling, halting, non sequential speaking style—as close to nonverbal speech as one can come without eliminating words entirely" (pp. 130-31). Key to Winn's (1987) figuration of television's influence is that television "use or overuse" is not one of the "symptoms of other modern ills," but rather that television is "a pathogen, a source of such symptoms" like "alienation, dehumanization, apathy, [and] moral vacuum" (p. 14). Thus, this abused foreign substance causes symptoms in both individual and social bodies.

There are less dire interpretations of television's physiological effects. Obesity and lack of physical fitness are often tied to television use. TV-Free America reports:

> 4.7 million kids between the ages of 6-17 (11% of this age group) to be severely overweight, more than twice the rate during the 1960s. The main culprits: inactivity (these same children average more than 22 hours of television-viewing a week) and a high-calorie diet. A 1991 study showed that there were an average [*sic*] of 200 junk food ads in four hours of children's Saturday morning cartoons.

Winn (1987) similarly suggests "dedicated TV watchers are fatter because they eat more and exercise less while glued to the tube" (p. 14). While these points may be accurate, the way they are used suggests that television itself *causes* obesity and inactivity. The causal potential of television to affect viewers physically and psychologically (as I will discuss more below) is dependent on conceiving of television as a drug-like foreign substance that is consumed, thereby altering the viewer's body and mind.

Television is also causally linked to other forms of inappropriate behavior. Nearly every article, book, and piece of organizational material around the anti-television movement cites the often-studied linkages between television viewing and violent behavior.[5] One nervous parent suggests that unless we limit television for young children, "we're in for a rude awakening when these kids become teenagers and we see increased use of guns, drugs, and teenage pregnancies. We need to spend more time reading and just talking" (Campbell 1996). This follows the discursive pattern of drug use, continually linked with violence and teenage sex in media accounts and public policy. Interestingly, this tie between television use and antisocial activity omits one of the key aspects of drug use—its criminalization. Many scholars and activists have argued that one reason illicit drug use is behaviorally linked to criminal activities is because of the criminality of using drugs themselves: a person already socially defined as a criminal is more likely to engage in criminal behavior than someone who is not (Goode 1993). Obviously, television watching is not only quite legal but is socially encouraged as a form of citizenship and leisure-time consumption; how this might lead to "further" criminal behavior seems unclear.

Winn (1985) goes the furthest in this vein by suggesting that television may serve as a "gateway drug," leading to "harder" drugs. She cites "expert" testimony for the linkage, quoting that "early experiences with electronic displays are predisposing to later enjoyment of psychoactive drugs which produce similar perceptual effects" (p. 64). She suggests that since drug use increased drastically in the mid- to late-1960s and that as these young drug users came of age during the television era, there must be a causal relationship between the two trends. Furthermore, she suggests that as the television viewing state mimics the state of "pure awareness" achieved through illicit drug use (see below for further discussion of this mind altered state), "perhaps a connection between a generation's drug involvement and its early television experiences will begin to seem possible" (pp. 132-34). This logic is a clear example of the citational power of the television-as-drug metaphor; in her book, she has reiterated so many times the argument that television is a drug that it begins to have sufficient truth value to use as evidence to support itself. According to Winn's circular logic, television is a drug, thus, drug use must stem from television, and therefore, television must clearly be a dangerous drug.

To further the notion that television use is a public health crisis, members of the anti-television movement rally the forces of the medical establishment to provide expert testimony condemning television as a causal factor in health issues. TV-Free America writes, "Dr. John Nelson of the American Medical Association (AMA) said that if 2,888 out of 3,000 studies show that TV violence is a causal factor in real-life mayhem, 'it's a public health problem.'" TV-Free America proudly reminds people that it is endorsed by a number of medical organizations, including the AMA, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Nurses Association. One article writes as evidence, "Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop blames [television] for a good share of teenage obesity" (Baker 1996, 46). Just as the Surgeon General warns against tobacco and other drugs, he is cited to frame television as a health issue.

The culmination of television's position as a drug-like public health crisis is found within an article about the AMA's decision to advise doctors to discuss television viewing with their patients. The article writes that the AMA believes that "many children are overdosing on television, leading to aggressive behavior, obesity, bad eating habits, and poor concentration." In response, they are issuing a guide to doctors listing "other possible side effects of excess media watching . . . : increased violence, increased cholesterol levels, increased sodium intake, insomnia, impaired school performance, increased sexual activity, decreased attention span, and increased use of tobacco and alcohol" (Campbell 1996, A1). Here, expert opinion equates television with a foreign substance, warning of potential overdose and possible side effects. Thus, television is framed as a drug with serious physiological consequences and behavioral impacts.

The TV-Drug as a Mind-Altering Substance

In Mander's (1978) discussion of the effects of television on viewers, he includes a list of (what he found to be) the fifteen most common descriptions of television's effects. Included in this list are the phrases, "television spaces me out," "TV is destroying my mind," "television is making people stupid," and "television is turning my mind to mush" (p. 158). Implicit in these statements is the notion that television has the power to alter the minds of its viewers. Of course, all forms of entertainment and communication alter people's minds in some manner, whether it be through a change in known information or emotional state, but the anti-television movement frames the mind-altering effects of television as profoundly destructive and debilitating to the "normal" human brain. This mind-altering process is most commonly framed as parallel to the act of taking narcotic drugs.[6]

Drugs themselves are not self-evident substances whose meanings derive from their chemical composition and use. While the term "drug" is

used throughout virtually every sphere of contemporary society, it conveys a multiplicity of meanings and implications. On one level, drugs refer to medicinal substances that have an impact on the body when ingested, ranging from morphine to penicillin; this definition may be active in pharmacological and medical spheres, but on a common societal level, drugs have more negative connotations. Drugs have a social-juridical meaning as well, referring to substances that have been deemed illegal and antisocial, regardless of their physiological effects. Thus, when LSD was outlawed in 1966, it became categorized as an illicit drug, despite no change in chemical composition or physical effects; while the substance itself did not undergo any material changes, its discursive existence was so profoundly altered that the drug itself was transformed at all levels, including that of user experience (Stevens 1987). A third aspect of drugs centers around their psychoactive or mind-altering effects; under this definition, legal drugs such as alcohol and caffeine are categorized with illicit drugs such as marijuana and cocaine. Within the realm of the television-as-drug metaphor, the meaning of "drug" generally refers to this latter category by emphasizing the mind-altering capacity of television, although the linkage to the illicit nature of many psychoactive drugs is highlighted throughout much of the discourse.

The anti-television movement emphasizes the passive nature of watching television, equating this practice with ingesting a foreign substance. Winn writes (1985), "The mind takes in the television images as they arrive and stores them intact" (p. 135). One editorialist describes her own watching of television as "letting nonstop idiocy wash over me" (Meadows 1996). Winn quotes a concerned mother's conception of the way television is ingested, saying, "It takes time to get television out of your system" (p. 260). The assumption of the passive television viewer being bodily affected by the contents and form of the medium runs throughout much of the academic literature on media effects, from the formative metaphor of the "hypodermic needle" effects of media, to treating the amount of television viewed as a controlled experimental variable, as if one would measure intake of toxins or medicines. This assumption is reiterated by the title of a long *Maclean's* article about television: "Toxic TV" (Chidley 1996). If we are to assume that the process of watching television is comparable to ingesting medications, toxins, or drugs, the very process of searching for the mental effects of television is colored and structured by this metaphor.

Just as television is framed as a potential toxin to be ingested, its effects are seen as narcotizing. Mander (1978) suggests that drugs and television both allow people "to achieve freedom from the driving of their minds . . . provid[ing] escape while passing for experience and relaxation" (p. 213). In framing television "as a refuge," one doctor suggests, "Television can act like morphine" (Morris 1971, 130). Winn (1985) writes, "Not

unlike drugs or alcohol, the television experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state" (p. 24). She evokes the drug experience by paralleling the "visual-motor conflicts" experienced by both drug and television "users" (p. 64). Another one of her extreme descriptions of the viewing experience evokes images of a hallucinogenic "trip": "by means of television, very young children were able to enter and spend sizable portions of their waking time in a secondary world of incorporeal people and intangible things, unaccompanied . . . by an adult guide or comforter" (p. 56). These descriptions of the television-watching state are enabled by the naturalized metaphor that allows us to logically conceive parallels between a substance that chemically alters the brain's composition and an audiovisual entertainment medium.

The most extended description of the passive "high" experienced by television viewers comes from Winn's (1985) formative book:

> The television-viewing state of consciousness is not far removed from that state described by drug users as *pure awareness*, in which " . . . the person is completely and vividly aware of his experience, but there are no processes of thinking, manipulating, or interpreting going on. The sensations fill the person's attention, which is passive, but absorbed in what is occurring, which is usually experienced as intense and immediate. Pure awareness is experiencing without associations to what is there." (P. 135; internal quotation by Charles Tart)

Thus, the seemingly passive nature of television spectatorship is marshaled as evidence for the ties between television and drugs, but the very notion that television is a foreign substance taken in passively is made possible by the prevalence and naturalization of the television-as-drug metaphor.

Within anti-television discourses, the medium is tied to a variety of drug genres beyond just hallucinogens, leading to a variety (and sometimes conflicting) set of psychological and physiological effects. One of the most common constructions is television as a stimulant, inspiring violent behavior and hyperactivity in its young viewers.[7] The TV-drug seems to be quite flexible in this discourse, as television also is conceived as a sedative, helping parents to "drug a child into inactivity [as] with laudanum or gin" (Winn 1985, 158). One article cites the stress of child-raising, suggesting that to maintain domestic sanity, "It's really come down to a question of television or Valium" (Chidley 1996). The sedative effect of television is profound: "The child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth. . . . The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look" (Winn 1985, 14). Winn (1985) blames parents for the decline in children's behavior and family relations, citing the frequent "use

[of] television to soothe and sedate an overactive child" (p. 16). Thus, while drugs are used to evoke fears of television's effects in viewers, the specific nature of the TV-drug is variable, sharing traits of hallucinogens, stimulants, and depressants.

Regardless of which type of mind-alteration television is linked to, it is commonly assumed that the process of television viewing causes long-term mental degradation. This "dumbing" process is seen in the nicknames used to describe both drugs and television. Many drugs are often referred to as "dope"; similar slang terms for television include "the boob tube" and "the idiot box," while television viewers are often called "vidiots" (see Winn 1985, x; Winn 1987, 3; Baker 1996). While these terms are not predicated on accepting the television-as-drug metaphor, they do work to reiterate the links between drugs, television, and stupidity. Thus concepts of how we view television, how we consider television functioning in society, and how we conceive of the people who watch television are bound up within a pervasive metaphor of television being a drug-like mind-altering substance that we ingest, causing short-term and long-term effects. Notably absent from this construction is the role of pleasure, both within drug use and television viewing; the discourses comprising the anti-television movement take a Puritanical position regarding both drugs and television, fostering the assumption that whatever pleasures are experienced by their "users" are delusional, destructive, or both. By constructing television's effects as a mind-altering drug experience, the only way the medium can be discussed is through the framework of a dangerous habit that must be eliminated for one's own health with no legitimate pleasures available to audiences.

The TV-Drug as Addictive

One core aspect of cultural knowledge of drugs centers around their addictive properties. While virtually all drugs are conceived of as addictive, there is a key distinction between physical addiction, which is possible with substances such as heroin and alcohol, and psychological dependence, common to various substances including marijuana and cocaine. Because of this difference, medical definitions of drugs have distinguished between the types of dependence that users can acquire specific to different drugs; for example, cocaine dependence is distinct from tranquilizer dependence (Goode 1993, 28-34). Scientific evidence that drugs such as cocaine and marijuana are not physically addicting does not stop them being discursively constructed as addictive, and therefore dangerous, substances. Addiction implies users' lack of ability to control their own intake and use of the abused substance; this lack of control is a useful factor for generating fear around a given substance, making the substance appear to

hold more power over its user than the user holds over it. Thus nearly every illicit drug (and many legal drugs as well) is framed as addictive; the anti-television movement has taken up this trope as well, suggesting the addictive potential of television.

Social science research, often used to support the anti-television movement, has been inconclusive in terms of discovering the potential addictive qualities of television. Kubey is generally cited as the "expert" in the field of television addiction, supporting TV-Free America's claims in their press releases:

> Millions of Americans are so hooked on television that they fit the criteria for substance abuse as defined in the official psychiatric manual, according to Rutgers University psychologist and TVFA board member Robert Kubey. Heavy TV viewers exhibit five dependency symptoms—two more than necessary to arrive at a clinical diagnosis of substance abuse. These include using TV as a sedative; indiscriminate viewing; feeling loss of control while viewing; feeling angry with oneself for watching so much; inability to stop watching; and feeling miserable when kept from watching.

Although his position seems quite decided above, in his social science research, he is less sure. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) write based on anecdotal information, "television viewing is unquestionably habit forming. It may even be addictive" (p. 138). They do not support this information scientifically, but it is cited by TV-Free America as evidence of the possibility of television addiction.

Another study, aimed specifically to determine whether television could be conceived of as addictive, had contrary findings. Seth Finn (1992) studied college students and discovered that television use is not positively correlated with the use of alcohol and marijuana, suggesting that a heavy television watcher is not typically a drug user. Similarly, he found that "sensation seeking" was tied to marijuana and alcohol use but not television viewing, suggesting that the motivations for drug use were not commonly motives for watching television. He concludes that conceptions of television abuse should foreground "significant viewer control and responsibility" over models of compulsory viewing due to addictive behavior and that any "concept of 'television addiction' requires careful and continuing delineation" (p. 435). Not surprisingly, Finn's study is not cited anywhere within the literature of the anti-television movement.

In opposition to Finn's call for "careful delineation" of television addiction, the term is casually thrown about in the anti-television movement literature. An editorial decries, "Many of us are angry with ourselves for watching too much and for letting our children watch too much. But, like addicts, we don't stop" (Meadows 1996, A4). The same author celebrates

TV-Turn Off Week, writing that it "gives us a chance to step away from our addiction—or fail to and thus realize how badly addicted we are" (Meadows 1996, A4). A columnist decries, "You're addicted and they're addicted, whether you binge on the weekends, or have a daily habit, or just can't seem to turn the set off between one program and the next" (Weltner 1995). Author Norman Morris (1971) categorizes two groups of television-addicted children:

> The first group includes those who are addicted because it relieves their sense of deprivation, as a narcotic might. The second group finds in the television set a substitute for the things the mother or father does not want to furnish. (P. 124)

Winn (1987) cites viewers' continued watching of television, despite the knowledge that it is somehow bad for them, as sure proof of addiction, a habit that "in its psychosocial consequences . . . may be as damaging as chemical addiction" (p. 16). Thus, she suggests, "It is the adverse effect of television viewing on the lives of so many people that defines it as a serious addiction" (Winn 1985, 25).

A *Newsweek* column by Colman McCarthy, self-proclaimed "television addict," exemplifies the television-as-drug metaphor clearly:

> It is true that an addiction had me, my veins eased only by a fix of 30 to 35 hours a week; my wife's dosage was similar. . . . The severity of an addiction to TV is not that it reduces the victim to passivity while watching it but that it demands he be a compulsive activist to get in front of it. (quoted in Winn 1985, 263)

While McCarthy's descriptions are dire, I would argue that the behavior he describes is only seen as troubling through the lens of drug discourse. Because he conceives of his television viewing in the terms of intravenous drug use, his behavior makes "sense" within the realm of addiction. If we were to place the act of television watching in another conceptual framework, such as television watching as a legitimate leisure activity, then someone being an "activist" to practice what might be their pastime would raise no red flags. But through McCarthy's citation of the television-as-drug metaphor, he works to further ingrain and naturalize the discursive link, presenting information in a manner whose internal logic is self-dependent to sustain itself—evidence that television is a drug can only be mobilized through the assumption that television may be a drug. In this manner, the discourse around the television-as-drug metaphor works as a self-fulfilling prophesy, perpetuating itself through its reiteration and excluding alternative frameworks for understanding the medium.

Throughout the discourse of television addiction, parallels are drawn between stopping television viewing and giving up an abused substance. Winn (1985) writes in a section titled "Videoholics Anonymous":

> Just as the first step in dealing with alcoholism is to make the addict face the fact that he has a drinking problem, so the first step in dealing with television addiction must be the widespread recognition that it is indeed a problem. Perhaps a new organization is needed today to alert the general public to the existence and nature of television addiction and to help families in their struggles to control television. (P. 221)[8]

Winn (1987) suggests that the addictive nature of television is a good motivator to get children to participate in a TV-Turn Off, writing, "The idea that the familiar act of TV viewing may actually be an addiction rarely fails to make kids interested in investigating this idea further" (p. 68). This logic seems a bit contradictory: if television causes users to lose control of their behavior through addiction, the acknowledgment of that addiction would seem to be a difficult step to take, not an immediately motivating factor to break the alleged addiction. Just as this discourse asserts that admitting one's television addiction must be the first step toward a cure, the cure must be extreme. One editorial writer wrote, "Like an alcoholic, a TV addict has to stop 'cold turkey.' A 'little' TV or 'regulated' TV doesn't cut it" (Dorothy Lamm, quoted in Winn 1987, 144).

One of the most reiterated aspects of television addiction that is marshaled in the anti-television movement is the rise of withdrawal symptoms when viewers stop watching television during a TV-Turn Off. Winn (1985) writes, "Most of the families [in a TV-Turn Off] reported experiencing some difficulties during the first days of the experiment, some of them comparing that period to 'withdrawal' from drugs or alcohol" (p. 247). One article warns, "Kicking the TV habit can create withdrawal symptoms. Ease into it" (Dawson 1996, 2E). A "reformed" TV addict suggested that he "went into 'news withdrawal' and began to buy two newspapers a day to make up for the loss of the evening news on television. . . . All of these withdrawal symptoms gradually diminished, however" (Joe Feather, quoted in Winn 1987, 137). Again, I would argue that the use of "withdrawal symptoms" as evidence of the legitimacy of television addiction is circular logic; because the television-as-drug discourse is accepted by those who give up television, the effects of giving it up become articulated within this discourse as withdrawal symptoms. Thus the knowledge of television as addictive serves as proof for television acting as a drug, but that very knowledge is predicated on the assumption that television is indeed a drug.

The TV-Drug as Centered Around Children

Much of the discourse around both television's effects and illicit drug use concerns their impacts on children. While many people may be willing to grant an adult's right to use or abuse whatever substance they deem appropriate, the specter of children is often raised to complicate notions of personal responsibility and consensual activity. Thus, within drug discourse, children are used to justify the need to legislate against and prosecute drug users; society has a responsibility to protect children from vices that may be acceptable in some instances for adults. In the 1980s, much of the antidrug hysteria was mobilized in the name of protecting children: the "Just Say No" campaign, Partnership for a Drug-Free America's media campaign, DARE's in-school drug education program, and the media creation of the crack baby scare (Reeves and Campbell 1994). As such, the threat of children's safety and well-being functions as the catalyst that can transform a potential social problem into a crisis worthy of serious political action.

The fear of children's physical and mental health is mobilized within the anti-television movement in a similar way, motivating the crusade and justifying action. Thus, TV-Free America focuses on schools and families as their site of intervention. Statistics around television and childhood are reiterated to provoke fear and alarm: 50% of children ages six to seventeen have television sets in their rooms. Children spend forty-three times more minutes watching television than "in meaningful conversation" with their parents each week. Children will see 8,000 televised murders before they finish elementary school.[9] "Preschool children are the single largest television audience in America" (Winn 1985, 4). All of these statistics are used to justify television not just as public crisis but as a crisis primarily affecting children, the most vulnerable and helpless portion of our society. Statistics like these feed into drastic overstatements such as Winn's (1987) declaration that "television stands alone as a universal source of parental anxiety" (p. 6).

Throughout the anti-television movement, differences between television viewing for adults and children are reiterated. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) write, "Due largely to lack of experience, education, and self-control, children are among the most likely of groups to becomes indiscriminate heavy viewers of television" (p. 168). Winn (1985) suggests that because children lack adults' "vast backlog of real-life experiences," their "television watching constitutes a primary activity for them. Their subsequent real-life activities will stir memories of television experiences, not, as for adult watchers, the other way around" (pp. 10-11). She further suggests that adults may have a legitimate need for television, but children's needs are contrary to watching the medium: "Unlike tired businessmen or professional women or harried homemakers who turn on

the television set to 'unwind,' young children have a built-in need for mental activity" (p. 55). Winn articulates the most extreme account of the difference in child-adult viewing in rationalizing how adults can control their children's viewing without limiting their own:

> [Adults'] own lives, after all, are different in many ways from the lives of their young children: they work, they have adult responsibilities, and they engage in a number of adult activities they would not dream of including their children in. Television viewing is but one of these adult activities. (P. 228)

If child spectatorship is seen as vastly different from adult viewing, how is watching television for children conceived? Much like the image of the "drug trip" used to describe the televisual experience, this vision is intensified for children: "A young child watching television enters a realm of materials completely beyond his control—and understanding. Though the images that appear on the screen may be reflections of familiar people and things, they appear as if by magic" (Winn 1985, 65). Winn (1985) also evokes psychological child development theories by suggesting that television returns children "to that comfortable, atavistic passivity that was once their right and that they must now renounce if they are to become functioning members of society" (p. 217). Television for children is conceived as both a magical journey, an image evoking hallucinogenic drugs, and a replacement for womblike plenitude, functioning as a narcotic substitution for the lack in a child's own life.

While the television set is conceived as a drug with damaging effects to children, parents are also described as potential victims of the television's addictive temptation. Winn (1985) repeatedly blames parents for their lack of adequate childrearing abilities:

> For as parents grow to depend on television more and more in their daily lives with their children, they withdraw from an active role in their children's upbringing, and gradually become less and less capable of coping with their . . . offspring. (P. 158)

Through their use of television as a sedative for their unruly children, "it is, in fact, the parents for whom television is an irresistible narcotic. . . . Surely there can be no more insidious a drug than one that you must administer to others in order to achieve an effect for yourself" (p. 12). Television is framed as the latest in a history of child-oriented narcotics: "In the absence of Mother's Helper (a widely used nineteenth-century patent medicine that contained a hefty dose of the narcotic laudanum), there is nothing that keeps children out of trouble as reliably as 'plugging them in'" (Winn 1987, 7). Thus parents are blamed not only for their inability to parent adequately

without the use of television but are also made guilty for subjecting their children to a destructive, addictive, and mind-altering substance like television.

How does the child-centered discourse of the television-as-drug metaphor advance the anti-television movement? By framing its effects on "innocent children," this discourse calls on a long tradition of mobilizing the victimization of children to bring about social action and locating the site of policing behaviors in the base level of the family. There is little consideration of how children's spectatorship may actually be operating, that children might learn from the medium as well as potentially gaining skills to read media critically. The working assumption of the anti-television movement is that children must watch television exactly like adults but without any of the experience, intelligence, or critical distance that adults have. It is never considered that children's cognitive processes are actually quite different from adults, adept at taking in, filtering through, and learning from many more new stimuli and experiences than adults are. The notion that children are merely adults minus their adulthood conceives of childhood as an empty vessel, devoid of meaning and identity; only a few media scholars have directly engaged with and countered these assumptions (Buckingham 1993). In the television-as-drug discourse, this empty vessel is filled with meanings of victimhood, innocence, and fragility, all working to justify social actions against television.

The TV-Drug User as Class and Race Situated

There is little question that drugs are discursively located within a poor and racially-Othered social body within contemporary America. From the recoding of cannabis as "marijuana" in the 1920s and 1930s to tie the drug to racist images of Mexicans, to the blackface painted onto the media coverage of crack cocaine in the Reagan era, drug use has been regularly linked with people of color, creating a false opposition between middle-class "clean" whites and poor black and Latino users (Sloman 1983; Reeves and Campbell 1994). This dichotomy is reproduced around television—heavy TV watching, as discursively linked to drug use, evokes fears in white middle-class America, while such heavy use is more common among poor communities of color. Such an opposition is both fueled by and constitutive of the TV-as-drug metaphor.

The anti-television movement explicitly addresses itself to a white middle-class "norm." Winn concentrates her research on middle-class families, and TV-Free America's material suggests that the bulk of the participants in their TV-Turn Offs reside in suburbs. Furthermore, Winn's discussion of the role television plays within the family reproduces this class bias through her assumption that a mother is always at home during the day to provide

children hours of nontelevised activities to more effectively stimulate their developing minds, a belief that may now be thoroughly out of date, but certainly carries a pronounced middle-class slant. Despite the concentration on middle-class (and presumably white) families within this movement, watching television is often cited as statistically more prevalent among poorer people of color (Gray 1995, 67). There is an important elision here, as statistical material concerning television's overuse is ripped from its broader social context and implanted within the narrowly construed white suburban home, reproducing the common trend of social fears of crime and drugs being most prevalent where these behaviors are least common. Thus suburban white families use the anti-television movement to further insulate themselves from inner-city blacks, placing heavy television viewing within the same category of unacceptable behavior as crime and drug use (Fiske 1994, 240-53).

The television-as-drug metaphor deepens these fears. In the anti-television movement, middle-class whites draw on images of the drug-using Other to promote fears about the medium through this metaphor. Given the racialized and classed social identity of both drug use and heavy television watching, this discourse evokes white middle-class fears of becoming too much like the Other. Television is claimed to cause violence, illiteracy, teenage sexuality, and drug use, all activities commonly situated within groups of lower-class people of color. The television-as-drug metaphor furthers this position, articulating its effects on the middle-class white child as socially Othered; thus, the fear of television viewing becomes tied to anxieties that a middle-class white child may become violent, lazy, intellectually stunted, and out of control, all characteristics discursively linked to poverty and blackness. This race and class articulation is furthered by the movement's emphasis on alternatives to television that are more "appropriate" to a suburban middle-class habitus, such as playing outside, planting a garden, and learning musical instruments. The reliance on the nuclear family as the explicit norm within which anti-television action takes place both highlights the potential destruction the TV-drug might cause in potentially Othering white children and locates the target of the organization's activism clearly outside of the margins of society who may be in most need of social activism. While the movement's racial and class biases are not as explicit as the other tropes I have discussed, the subtle evocation of the Other through the television-as-drug metaphor works to further ensconce middle-class white social anxieties around this "abused substance."

The TV-Drug as Necessitating Social Control

Drugs are explicitly defined as a social problem, affecting more than just the individual user. As such, proposed and attempted solutions for drugs

are generally carried out at a social level rather than an individual level. Organizations have appeared serving various functions: helping the individual regain control of their substance abuse, promoting greater education and knowledge of drugs, working to provide alternatives for drug use, and moving toward the eradication of the underground illicit drug industry. Official state interventions have focused on criminalizing and prosecuting drug use, as well as educational approaches to prevention and recovery. Various philosophies for overcoming drug use have been debated and explored publicly, ranging from legalization to greater involvement in spirituality, from eliminating social causes of substance abuse to self-help approaches toward betterment and healing. But throughout the various positions and actions concerning drug use, the emphasis is always on the public and social nature of the problem and the necessity of ending drug use through social solutions.

The anti-television movement has framed television in a similar light, pointing to the widespread social nature of the medium's threat to public health (as discussed above). As the problem is posed as public and social, it seemingly necessitates a public and social solution. TV-Free America and organizations like it attempt to fill this need. Crucial to this movement is understanding that it is the medium itself, not its programming or its misuse, that is the cause of the problem. Thus, books such as Mander's (1978) and Winn's (1985, 1987) propose the eradication and effective control of the medium, not its content. This approach can only be understood when framed within the television-as-drug metaphor; it would be hard to conceive of any movement calling for the elimination of a different communications medium, such as film or newspapers, or another cultural form, such as books or theater. Yet, it makes sense, however extreme, to call for the eradication of television because it has been naturalized as a drug and therefore deserving of large-scale social controls, albeit to be enacted on the local familial level.

The pervasive reach of the television-as-drug metaphor extends far beyond the anti-television movement. The narcotizing nature of television and other forms of mass culture has been proposed by numerous social critics and theorists, ranging from members of the Frankfurt School to social science researchers. Television is often condemned in other media, including film, popular music, and literature, often mobilizing the drug metaphor to further delegitimate television and improve the public regard for other cultural forms.[10] Sometimes, the metaphor is mobilized in opposition to its negative connotations, as public figures such as Timothy Leary hail the medium as a "wonder drug," tying the liberatory potential of television to the "free your mind" discourse of LSD and other hallucinogens. Often, television takes the metaphor and ironically turns it inside-out, as in advertisements calling attention to their own mind-altering ability, such as ABC's

1997 ironic campaign, claiming "Watch TV—Don't Worry, You've Got Billions of Brain Cells," or MTV's promotional material begging viewers to "plug themselves in" or "tune in, turn on, and drop out."[11]

Today possibly more than ever, television is constructed as a scapegoat for social ills, much like drugs have been used for many years. Following violent incidences such as at Columbine High School in 1999, blame is easily placed on the medium that has already been discursively defined as a public health crisis, as a social ill, and as a threat to children. While the television-as-drug metaphor is not solely responsible for these linkages, it certainly has had a profound reiterative effect in deepening and confirming these cultural assumptions. As critical scholars of media and culture, we must engage with this metaphor and refuse to yield it any more ground of our collective common sense. The messages of the anti-television movement are effective because they tap into a pervasive discourse, one that resonates with widespread feelings toward our culture's most predominant medium. Many of their critiques of television are quite valid: lack of physical exercise, overexposure to consumerist and narrowly focused representations, and uncritical engagements with the medium are all potential dangers of television viewing. But we must engage directly with the anti-television movement's other assumptions, not to become "television apologists" but to dismantle the metaphorical foundation on which this movement is built. Only by exposing the ways in which television-as-drug is only a metaphor, not the truth, can we regain the ground already lost to extremist views calling for television's eradication and hope to engage in more fundamental discussions of television's role within contemporary culture.

Notes

1. My information about TV-Free America is primarily drawn from material sent to me by the organization as well as information available on their official Web site (http://www.tvfa.org); subsequent references to TV-Free America documents will not be cited. Ironically, TV-Free America has not come out with any positions about the medium of computers and the Internet, a format that they willingly use for publicity, yet do not criticize (or defend) for its similarities to television.

2. Additional advisors for TV-Free America include scholars who take somewhat different (yet still negative) approaches to television (Todd Gitlin, George Gerbner, Mark Crispin Miller, and Neil Postman), experts from other disciplines (political theorist Robert Putnam, environmental economist Steven J. Bennett, educator John Taylor Gatto, environmentalist David Brower, psychologist Robert Coles, and management specialist Benjamin Lev), and artists who are involved in nontelevision cultural forms which are validated by the anti-television movement

(author Barbara Kingsolver, essay and fiction writer Wendell Berry, and children's musician Raffi).

3. In addition, I asked a representative of TV-Free America for information about television and addiction; he referred me to Winn and Kubey's works.

4. Although not directly relevant to my argument, it is vital to note that the anti-television movement is not the product of conservative forces looking back toward an earlier America but rather is located within a socially liberal habitus, exemplified by leftist board members Neil Postman and Todd Gitlin, as well as a similar anti-television message within Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*.

5. I am purposely not discussing the links between television and violence in depth. In part, this is due to the focus of this research on the particular programming that causes violence, a position that Winn (1985, 1987), Mander (1978), and TV-Free America work against through their emphasis on the act of television watching, not the specific programs watched. In addition, the amount of literature on television and violence is so vast and overwhelming that it could not properly be examined within such a short project.

6. Some other modes of mind alteration run through the discourse as well, including hypnotization, mesmerization, and brainwashing; but rather than competing with the TV-as-drug metaphor, these other meanings are used to reinforce the narcotic construction.

7. Again, the citations of television promoting violent behavior are too numerous to adequately approach in this brief article. Winn and TV-Free America refer to many studies justifying this position throughout their writings.

8. The publication of this passage predated the formation of TV-Free America, although it is unclear whether this group would fulfill Winn's specific call.

9. Statistics are drawn from TV-Free America material.

10. Examples of the TV-as-drug metaphor in other media include films such as *Videodrome* (1982), in which experimental television transmissions cause hallucinations, violence, and psychosis, and novels such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), which parallels accounts of alcohol and narcotic addiction to a fatally compelling and pleasurable video known only as "The Entertainment."

11. The ABC campaign provoked an official press release from TV-Free America decrying the campaign as out-of-touch and potentially damaging.

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