

UNDERCURRENTS

The Magazine of Radical Alternatives and Community Technology

Xmas without Television



TELEVISION is one of the most pervasive and time-consuming forms of modern technology. Yet, unlike nuclear power, microprocessors or supersonic transports, television has seldom been the object of action or even of serious analysis by activists working towards greater democracy and self-management.

Jerry Mander in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*¹ has gone a long way towards rectifying this lack of analysis².

Mander built himself a conventional, but highly successful, career in advertising. Then things began to change for him. In the late 1960s, in San Francisco, he began to be called upon as a media advisor by protest groups. Then he was hired by the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth and other groups to write advertisements about ecological issues. The response of the conventional clients of his agency to these ecological advertisements and his own perception of the results of these efforts, led Mander to leave advertising and begin his investigation into the effects of television.

Mander's four arguments against television are:

1. that television reinforces the trend towards living in an artificial environment, cut off from direct knowledge of the world and susceptible to the implantation of arbitrary realities;

2. that television is technologically and economically suited to domination by corporate giants;

3. that television produces neuro-physiological effects which are probably unhealthy and which condition people to accept autocratic control;

4. that television technology is inherently more able to convey some types of information than others—and it is at its most effective when transmitting simplified linear messages, especially advertising.

These are criticisms of the technology of TV, and should not be hard to digest for readers familiar with previous critiques of technology³.

Mander states that 'Most Americans, whether on the political left, centre or right, will argue that technology is neutral, that any technology is merely

Just imagine: Christmas without The Sound of Music, Walt Disney, Larry Grayson or the Queen. But would television be any better if the programmes were less imbecilic? Jerry Mander thinks not. He argues

Life Without

a benign instrument, a tool, and depending upon the hands into which it falls, it may be used one way or another'. The central point of his book, he says, is that this belief, about television as well as other technologies, is 'totally wrong'.

It does not require long memory to remember the days when it was commonly believed that nuclear power plants, and even nuclear weapons, were intrinsically 'neutral'. Even today a common attitude to nuclear power is that it would be acceptable if it were made safer, with higher standards for reactor safety, stricter safeguards against proliferation and so forth. A similar idea—still adhered to by some socialist groups—is that nuclear power is dangerous under capitalism but all right under workers' control.

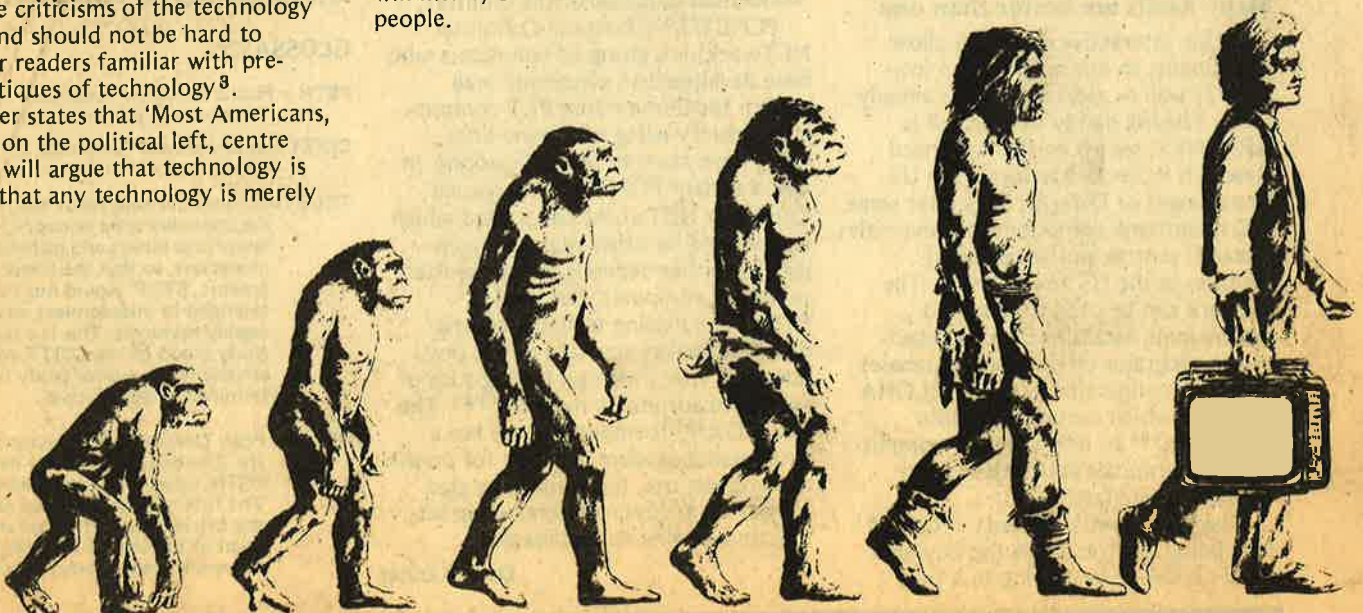
The same attitudes are even more common when it comes to television. The suggested reforms are many: promote better programming, reduce television's emphasis on violence, reduce x-ray emissions from television sets, ban offensive advertising, institute provisions for equal time for alternative viewpoints, promote community access television. But if television technology is indeed *intrinsically* biased—towards creation of artificial realities, centralised control, inducing passive behaviour and communicating simple linear messages—such reforms will merely serve to hook even more people.

Mander says that 'television, for the most part, cannot possibly yield to reform'. Hence, he argues that television should be *eliminated*. This may sound strange and unreal. But it was not so long ago that the idea of eliminating nuclear power or supersonic transports was just as strange. One difference is that television is well and truly institutionalised, like automobiles and nuclear weapons but unlike nuclear power and SSTs. But, as Mander concludes his book, we must 'purge from our minds the idea that just because television exists, we cannot get rid of it'.

I will not go into the details of Mander's arguments against television here, since he does that quite well in his book. But I will assume that the question of the role of television in society should be an important one for activists working towards local self-management—even if they do not fully subscribe to all of Mander's arguments and conclusions. Mander describes *why* television should be eliminated, but not *how* this might be accomplished.

Campaigning against television

There are several issues around which campaigns against television might be orientated. The comparison



that TV is *inherently* unreal, unhealthy, simplistic and authoritarian: it should simply be *abolished*. Brian Martin has been looking at what an anti-television campaign would mean.

Television.....?

between television and nuclear power is a useful one. I make it not because of any special similarity between these two technologies, but because many people have been involved in campaigns against nuclear power and are familiar with the issues and arguments.

Environmental effects. In the case of nuclear power, environmental and health hazards have been the basis for a large component of public concern. Yet many who are familiar with the issues would agree that non-environmental hazards—such as proliferation of nuclear weapons capability, terrorism, and threats to civil liberties—are much more important in a fundamental sense. It may be that environmental objections have obtained currency precisely for the reason that they do not seem to be political. The *apparently* apolitical objection thus serves as a basis for political action about a technology which does indeed have immense political effects.

Mander devotes more space to his argument 3, which is concerned with the effects of television on the human being, than to any other argument. One of the important points he makes is that there is an extreme scarcity of studies on the neurophysiological effects of television. Another problem in

documenting any health hazards is the subtlety of the effects. But the same applies to most of the health effects arising from nuclear power. A more serious limitation in using health effects as a basis for opposing television is that the hazards *seem* to be accepted voluntarily. Individual users purchase and personally interact with television technology, like automobiles but unlike nuclear power. This makes it harder to realise, at least for the purposes of political action, that the technology is being promoted by and selectively adapted for the purposes of powerful vested interests.

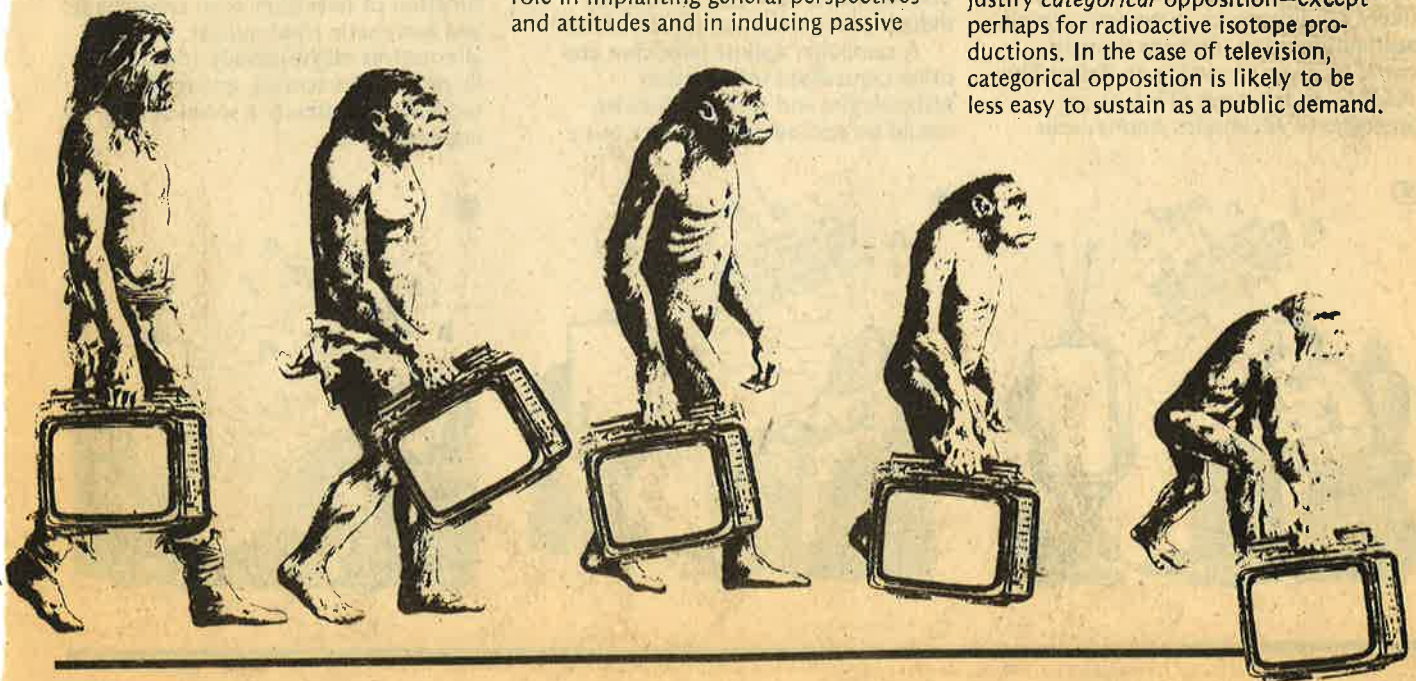
Use by elites. Centralised political and economic control is characteristic equally of nuclear power and of television. Challenges mounted against either of these technologies would also be a threat to this centralised control. In the case of nuclear power and other large-scale energy technologies, a primary factor is the sheer scale of economic investment and the enormity of the infrastructure involved in electricity grids, production facilities, energy-using equipment, urban planning and the like. Communication technologies do not (yet) rival this level of economic and structural investment. On the other hand, television is more deeply enmeshed in social and psychological patterns throughout the community, through its role in implanting general perspectives and attitudes and in inducing passive

behaviour. Thus television is useful to elite groups more through its impact on people's ways of thinking and perceiving than through any direct economic influence.

In fighting nuclear power, effective opposition has been organised relatively straightforwardly around environmental, political and economic issues, including the advocacy of alternatives. But a struggle against television may have to base its efforts on a rather deeper understanding of the psychological and ideological aspects of social control and the individual's adaptation to society.

Selective usefulness. By its very nature (high potential danger, large scale, high capital cost and high complexity) nuclear power is unsuited for direct control by workers or the community. Short of developing a hypothetical clean, simple, cheap, small-scale community reactor, there seems no way to avoid this. The technology of television, on the other hand, has a greater *potential* as a self-managed community resource. Television sets, broadcasting facilities and programmes could, conceivably, be produced under conditions of worker and community control. Indeed, with cheap video equipment and increasing use of video cassettes, some of these possibilities seem to be coming nearer. However, it is not clear that these alternatives yet provide much of a threat to centralised broadcasting.

These points suggest that a campaign against television would need to consider carefully the desirability or otherwise of possibilities such as community access television. Similar problems arise in assessing some energy technologies, such as tidal power or solar power towers. In the case of nuclear technology, it is possible to justify *categorical* opposition—except perhaps for radioactive isotope productions. In the case of television, categorical opposition is likely to be less easy to sustain as a public demand.



Effects on activists. Nuclear power in its role as a technology does not have a great direct effect on activists, except perhaps in causing a few cancers. (Nuclear power does of course give rise to a great deal of *activism*, and to efforts by corporations and the state to oppose this activism.)

Television, on the other hand, has a great direct impact on activists and on activism in general. Most activists—though probably a smaller percentage than the general populace—watch television some of the time. More importantly, the general level of social activism is almost certainly reduced, being displaced by the millions of person-hours spent before television screens each day. Then there are the physiological and psychological effects of television, so well described by Mander, which combine to induce passivity, to reduce touch with reality and to increase cravings for immediate stimuli and results. These effects could hardly be better designed to inhibit efforts towards long-term political organising at the grass-roots.

If a drug is defined, very generally, as an artificial cause of change in physiological or psychological functioning, television is one of modern society's most pervasive and addictive drugs. Marie Winn⁴ cites studies and presents many examples to show that breaking the television habit almost uniformly leads to improvements in individual and group well-being. Yet these very studies and examples also testify to the extreme difficulty of permanently kicking the habit.

This suggests that a campaign against television must clearly address the need to break the television viewing habit. Those who have succeeded in doing this are prime candidates for an anti-television movement, just as cyclists are likely candidates for campaigns against automobilisation. Perhaps thought could be given to setting up Television Addicts Anonymous (TVAA), an analogue to Alcoholics Anonymous



TV makes people SICK!!
 TV ENSLAVES you and SAPS ALL YOUR CREATIVE ENERGY!
 TV MAKES YOU LIKE DOPE!
 TV is obviously a "VAST WASTELAND" This is common knowledge.
 TV is just plain BAD for you physically, mentally, and spiritually. Watching it will cause you great unhappiness in life and you're more than likely to get CANCER!!

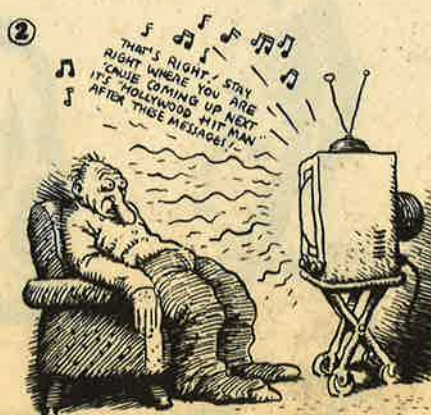
and Synanon. (Unfortunately, however, such organisations are not noted as being prime recruiting grounds for participants in other social movements.)

Alternatives. The anti-nuclear power movement began, and for some years was, primarily an *opposition* movement, vocally against nuclear power but with little comment about alternatives. This exclusively negative stance has often been criticised by both supporters and opponents of the movement. But this situation did not last. For some years, well researched and thought out alternatives have been advocated, involving varying proportions of conservation, renewable energy technologies and social and institutional changes. Groups such as Environmentalists for Full Employment are forging links between environmentalists and workers. These developments have put the nuclear industry very much on the defensive.

A campaign against television and other centralised information technologies and systems likewise would be well advised to work out a

clear alternative. This might involve local newspapers, local presses, local radio broadcasting, CB radio, telephone networks, courier information distribution systems, workplace or community meetings and public notice boards. Planning and managing local information systems might be done by groups of volunteers, by groups with elected or rotating membership, or by groups chosen randomly (like the jury system). The alternatives certainly would involve adapting and creating communication technologies for local and individual needs. And, of course, the alternative would need to provide a clear threat to prevailing systems of centrally controlled and manipulated media.

Some attention should also be paid to providing alternatives for the function of television as an anaesthetic and automatic child-minder. Such alternatives might include communal living, drop-in centres, and more sociable and attractive social action organisations.



Campaigning without television

In the meantime, activists in all movements need to consider carefully their relation to television. Here are some suggestions that seem to me to follow from what Mander has argued.

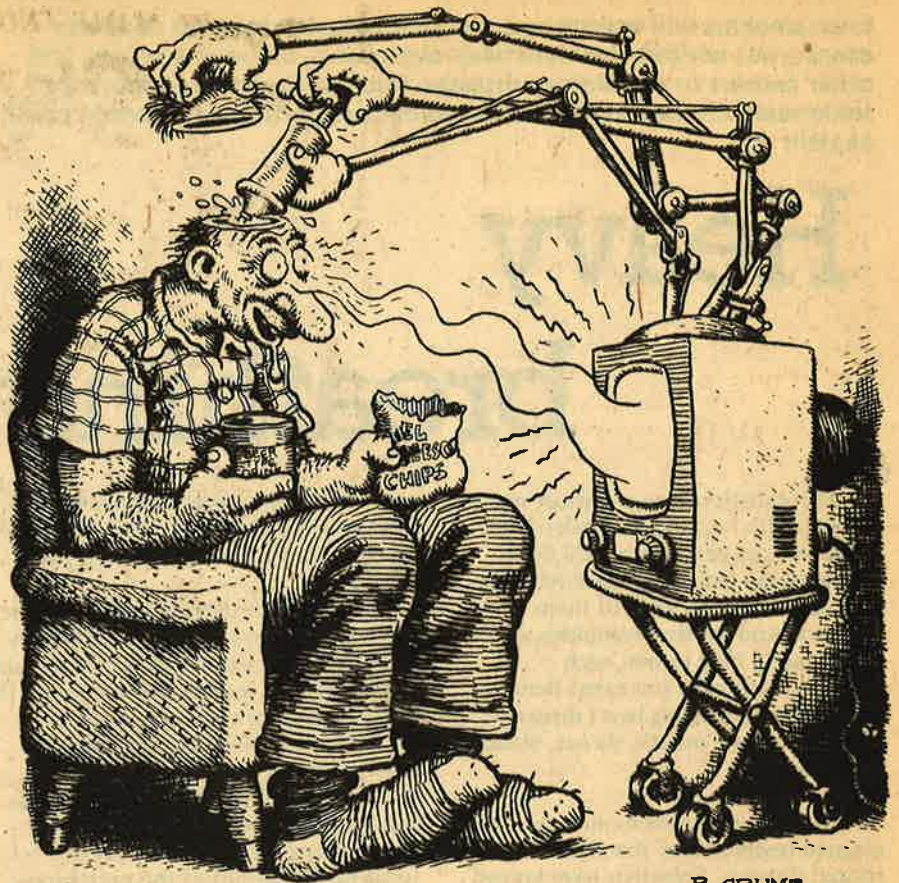
1. Individuals should watch television as little as possible. If there are significant numbers of programmes considered important by activist groups—such as daily news programmes—perhaps one or two members, rotated frequently, could be assigned the task (or pleasure?) of viewing them.

2. Television should not be used for getting one's message across. For most small grass-roots organisations this is not possible anyway. But for rich environmental organisations, some unions, and political parties, there is often a pressure to try to compete in getting one's message across on television. Completely avoiding television advertising and refusing to compete can help discredit television as a balanced medium. It might be that such a policy would lead eventually, in the manner of co-option, to offers of free time. But in any case, funds would be released for alternative modes of communication which are less inherently biased.

3. The value of publicity-seeking—demonstrations, stunts, scaremongering, contrived stories—should be carefully scrutinised in the light of television's inherent limitations. The alternatives—patient grass-roots organising, collective working out of strategies, building up local bases of support and the like—should be considered on their merits, independent of publicity value.

4. Alternative communication networks, and their relation to the group's goals, should be used whenever possible. In using television, a few people do something and many people watch. In moving towards a self-managed society, the aim should be to attain just the opposite result.

Brian Martin



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Notes

1. Jerry Mander, *Four arguments for the elimination of television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978, and New English Library, London 1980).
2. Some other perspectives on television and media in general are given by Robert Cirino, *Don't blame the people: how the news media use bias, distortion and censorship to manipulate public opinion* (Los Angeles: Diversity Press; 1971), Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness industry: on literature, politics and the media* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974); Alan Swingewood, *The myth of mass culture* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Raymond Williams, *Television: technology and cultural form* (London: Fontana, 1974).
3. David Dickson, *Alternative technology and the politics of technical change* (London: Fontana, 1974). Godfrey Boyle, Peter Harper and the editors of *Undercurrents* (eds.), *Radical Technology* (London: Wildwood House, 1976).
4. Marie Winn, *The plug-in-drug* (New York: Viking, 1977).

