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A Convergence of TV and Computers?

There are those among us who were hoping computer technology was going to deliver us from the evils of television—not bring us more of it.

by THOMAS PACK

“You watch television to turn your brain off,” said Apple Computer and Pixar co-founder Steve Jobs. “You work on your computer when you want to turn your brain on.”

For years, however, we all have heard about a coming convergence of computers and television. In 2001, AOL chairman Barry Schuler said he was “pretty confident” that “over the next 10 years, the services that will ride over a single line into your home are telephone services, your video, your television services, your connection to the Internet. ... It’s

really all fundamentally going to be the same.”

In the book *Digital Journalism*, published in October 2003, contributor Rich Gordon said we are witnessing “the transformation of television as TV sets take on more and more of the attributes of computers. For technology convergence to enter the living room, televisions will need access to the Internet, the capacity to receive and store digital content, and the ability for viewers to interact with content (and advertising) on the screen.

“All these technology changes are starting to happen,” Gordon said. “Internet access is available through cable Internet services. Digital broadcasting has already begun. Products such as TiVo and writable digital videodisc (DVD) drives allow the storage and playback of digital video. Cable and

satellite TV providers have also begun—especially in Europe—to roll out interactive television services.”

Now, leading technology companies such as Microsoft and Intel are working to convince us that we need media-center computers in our homes to integrate music, movies, games, and television (see, for example, <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/mediacenter/default.msp> and http://www.intel.com/personal/digital_home/index.htm).

But there are those among us who were hoping computer technology was going to deliver us from the evils of television—not bring us more of it. Some people still cling to the hope that substantive Internet content will take the mass audiences away from the banalities of “reality” television, sitcoms,

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Lost in Translation CyberSports

by DAVID KING

The latest joke from your Field Correspondent’s extended family:

What do you call someone who can speak three languages? Trilingual.

What do you call someone who can speak two languages? Bilingual.

What do you call someone who can speak only one language? American.

You may laugh politely now.

In your Field Correspondent’s normal line of work—if you call chasing sweaty, often odd people wearing weird suits a normal line of work—it’s becoming more and more obvious that being your average ol’ American

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How to Respond to Flames (Without Getting Singed)

If you’ve spent any amount of time in online discussion groups, you probably know that their single most-defining characteristic is the prevalence of angry, epithet-strewn arguments called “flame wars.”

The level of online hostility, with “flames” fired back and forth among participants, can, at times, make these groups appear to be the ultimate refuge for sociopaths to release years of pent-up frustration. The safety of distance and relative anonymity make these verbal battles virtually risk-free.

Recently, best-selling author Anne Rice made headlines by responding to flames directed toward her and her latest novel *Blood Canticle* in the discussion area of Amazon.com. Among the flames were the following:

- “I cannot stress to you how bad this book is.”
- “I have read almost every one of Anne Rice’s novels, and I have to say this is the worst one.”
- “I have read short stories by eighth graders that had more thought than this drivel did.”
- “Anne, you really should have an editor, or at least someone [who] would read your book before you send it off to print.”
- “Anne Rice is overrated. Her books are long, drawn-out, and boring.”

Other people attacked her state of mind since the death of her husband 2 years ago. Ouch.

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Convergence

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sensationalized news, and incessant advertising. There even is a small group of people working hard on their computers to get you to turn off your television and turn on your brain.

Tilting at TV Towers

Ron Kaufman wants to kill your television. In 1995, Kaufman, a high school instructional-technology coordinator in Philadelphia, created the Kill Your Television Web site (<http://www.turnoffyourtv.com>) to encourage people to “drastically cut down” the time they spend “in a vegetable-like state in front of the tube.”

This is, of course, a quixotic goal. The Consumer Electronics Association projects that annual sales of digital television sets will grow from about 7 million last year to 27.1 million by 2008. To make matters worse, the digital, big-screen television costing thousands of dollars has become a top American status symbol.

Yes, people sometimes turn off the tube to read the paper or surf the Web—but not that often. According to a 2001 study by Veronis Suhler Stevenson, a New York-based media finance company, the average American spends 24 minutes per day using the Internet. That’s about the same amount of time we spend reading newspapers and more than we spend looking at magazines. It’s one-sixth the time we spend listening to radio and only one-tenth the time we spend watching television.

Daily use of the Web undoubtedly has gone up since 2001, now that more people have broadband connections, but, by any measure, television remains the dominant communication medium.

On Kill Your Television, Kaufman makes it clear how he feels about spending time in front of the tube. His articles have such titles as “The creation of network zombies,” “Digital TV—just say no,” and “The beautiful people syndrome—how television warps your mind.”

Kaufman also posts reviews, reports, and quotations from other critics of television, including this comment from American University law professor Jamie Raskin: “Everybody’s got values. ... The thing that frightens me is the way that ... television on all over the place is leading to a steady dumbing down of the American public and a corrosion of basic critical thinking in the population.”

For people who don’t have the thinking skills necessary to figure out what to do with themselves when they aren’t watching TV, Kaufman offers suggestions. For example, an area of his site includes nature photos meant to inspire you to get off the couch and take a hike in the woods.

The New Medium Is the New Message

Of course, criticism of television is nothing new. “By the 1960s, television was the dominant mode of entertainment and communications in America,” said Steven Lubar in his book *InfoCulture*. Four decades ago, television already “had become central to our culture in ways that were hard to understand. Many writers tried to make sense of it, tried to grasp the meaning of television to our society. Some criticized the role of advertisers, arguing that the problem was commercial control of the central element of American culture.”

What is new is that anti-television crusaders now have a commercial-free,

interactive, global medium to help rally people to their cause. When electronic-media guru Marshall McLuhan wrote in the ’60s that “the medium is the message,” he meant that the “medium is more important than its content,” Lubar says, and television, by its very nature, brings on “a numbness or trance state.” Today, crusaders are hoping the nature of the Web—its international reach and inherent interactivity—will spur people to action.

White Dot: The International Campaign Against Television advocates a more radical approach to ungluing people from their TVs. The organization’s Web site (<http://www.whitedot.org>) offers information on the dangerous effects of television and promotes the use of TV-B-Gone, a device designed for people who want to silence sets in a growing number of public places, including restaurants, airports, and supermarkets. When you press the button on the TV-B-Gone (an easy-to-conceal gadget that hangs from a keychain), it transmits “off” commands for every brand of television.

Another organization, the Washington, D.C.-based TV-Turnoff Network, is part of an international effort to get people to leave their televisions off—at least for 1 week in April. The organization’s Web site (<http://www.tvturnoff.org>) offers how-to guides and resources for teachers and parents interested in joining its campaigns. The site also offers essays, reports, and quotations, such as this from architect Frank Lloyd Wright: “Television is chewing gum for the eyes.”

You can find lists of links to other anti-television sites at TV-Turnoff Network and Kill Your Television. Yahoo! offers a list too (http://dir.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/Television/Anti_Television). But

these lists are short, and some of the links on them don’t work, presumably because the cited sites have shut down. This suggests that the anti-TV movement is a shrinking phenomenon rather than a growing one.

Perhaps the anti-television crusaders whose sites have shut down became too disheartened to continue running them when they found out that the most-searched-for people on the Internet are not artists, authors, world leaders, or important people in history; they are Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. The most-searched-for duo is Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, followed by Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa, according to tallies by AOL.

Maybe the crusaders gave up after they realized more and more Web sites, even those that don’t offer video, are modeling their content on the worst of television, including entertainment “news” programs and daytime talk show inanities. For example, if you download the Netscape browser and do not change your home page, you will be greeted on the Web with content that includes celebrity gossip, diet tips, and teaser links to fluffy reports such as “What guys really want.”

In a 1958 article in *TV Guide*, journalist Edward R. Murrow said this about television: “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely light and wires in a box.”

The same can be said of the computer.

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Lost in Translation

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sports writer just isn’t going to cut it anymore. Not when many of the top players in baseball slip between English and Spanish as easily as they change out of their uniforms and into their Armani suits, or when the best player in the Olympic basketball tournament is an Argentine with an Italian surname who plays professionally in South Texas.

In the name of all that is sacred to we ink-stained wretches, sports is a multilingual world now. (And we’re not including Canadian English as a second language, eh.)

As an example, take the Web home of Emanuel Ginobili, the aforementioned polyglot Olympian. At <http://www.manuginobili.com>, viewers are immediately asked their language preference—English, Spanish (denoted in most places on the site by the Argentine flag—hey, everyone has their preferences), and Italian. (The

Italian link sends you to a page that explains that the Webmaster originally lined up to do the page in Italian has jumped ship. At least, I think that’s the case, since there are no classes in Italian on my transcript from Enormous State University.)

Knowing enough Spanish to inquire about a sore pitching arm or a case of homesickness, your Field Correspondent clicked on Español. The site contains a nice collection of content, including commentary on Our Hero’s heroic efforts in Athens (which led Argentina to the gold medal) and Manu’s own diary (updated on a semi-regular basis) on life in the NBA. (It’s reassuring to know that, in any language, athletes sometimes slip into those grungy, old clichés, roughly translated as, “I wouldn’t wish these gawdawful NBA road trips on anyone.”)

Over on the English (or more likely, Spanish-translated-to-English) side, there’s a series of 50-question interviews with Ginobili, covering everything from dreaming about being an Argentine sports legend

(“Nobody would have. It’s not common nor frequent.”) to fans (“Argentine fans are more passionate and American fans are more respectful and well-mannered.”) to the U.S. team’s struggles in Athens

It’s reassuring to know that, in any language, athletes slip into grungy old clichés.



(“A group of very talented players, that couldn’t prove to be a team.”).

If you’re into the visuals, there’s also a photo gallery (which includes a wedding photo—sorry, ladies), a collection of Manu wallpaper for your computer’s desktop (with Our Hero sailing through the air, carried by a pair of wings), and even a screen saver. And, yes, there are

instructions in English for you American readers out there.

And just in case you think this is all unique content, click on the link for Manu’s NBA stats—voilà, <http://www.NBA.com>. Oh well, at least we all can read it. Just don’t click on that little box at the bottom left that says “Global,” or you might wind up at <http://www.NBA.com/japan> or [NBA.com/germany](http://www.NBA.com/germany), where you can do something involving “LeBron James” and “All-Stat Balloting” and “liegt nach den ersten Auswertungen.”

Get that Manu feeling at <http://www.manuginobili.com>.

Hey Ref!

One of Manu Ginobili’s more diplomatic efforts on the English side of his Web site is his response to questions about the differences between NBA and FIBA (international) rules. He sidestepped the

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