**Thinking Outside the Idiot Box**

**Does watching TV make you smarter? Duh ... I dunno.**

By [Dana Stevens](http://www.slate.com/authors.dana_stevens.html)|Posted Monday, April 25, 2005, at 6:59 PM ET



If watching TV really makes you smarter, as [Steven Johnson argued](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/24/magazine/24TV.html?) in an article in yesterday's *New York TimesMagazine* (an excerpt from his [forthcoming book](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1573223077/104-1112282-5718352?v=glance)) then I guess I need to watch a lot more of it, because try as I might, I could make no sense of Johnson's piece. As far as I can tell, his thesis is that television shows have slowly grown more and more complicated over the last two decades (this paradigm shift apparently having begun with *Hill Street Blues*, the Gutenberg Bible of the smart-TV era), so that now, like rats in a behaviorist's maze, trained viewers can differentiate among up to 12 distinct plotlines in shows like *The Sopranos*. (The technical term for this great leap forward in human cognition: "multi-threading.") In other words, if I understand correctly, watching TV teaches you to watch more TV—a truth already grasped by the makers of children's programming like *Teletubbies*, which is essentially a tutorial instructing toddlers in the basics of vegging out.

[Tony S. on the brain 
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Tony S. on the brain

As long as Johnson defines intelligence strictly in quantitative [cog-sci](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognitive-science/) terms ("attention, patience, retention, the parsing of narrative threads," etc.), his case may seem solid. Those of us who grew up in caveman days, fashioning crude stone tools while watching *Starsky and Hutch*, are indeed now better-positioned than our forebears to follow such complex narrative fare as *The Sopranos* (though the analogy is faulty in that *The Sopranos* is clearly one of the high-end, sophisticated shows of its day, better compared to '70s offerings like *Soap* or *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman).* But does that make us any smarter?

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Not only does Johnson fail to account for the impact of the 16 minutes' worth of commercials that interrupt any given episode of, say, *24* (a show he singles out as particularly "nutritional"), but he breezily dismisses [recent controversies](http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,1401755,00.html) about that program's representation of Muslim terrorists or its [implicit endorsement of torture](http://www.slate.com/id/2093269/), preferring to concentrate on how the show's formal structure teaches us to "pay attention, make inferences, track shifting social relationships."  Wait a minute—isn't a fictional program's connection to real-life political events like torture and racial profiling one of the "social relationships" we should be paying attention *to*? *24* is the perfect example of a TV show that challenges its audience's cognitive faculties with intricate plotlines and rapid-fire information while actively discouraging them from thinking too much about the vigilante ethic it portrays. It's really good at teaching you to think … about future episodes of *24*.

Johnson's claims for television as a tool for brain enhancement seem deeply, hilariously bogus—not unlike the graphically mesmerizing [plot diagram](http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2005/04/21/magazine/24tv.chart1.jpg) he provides of "any episode" of *Starsky and Hutch* as a foil for the [far fancier grid](http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2005/04/21/magazine/24tv.chart3.jpg) representing *The Sopranos*. (No matter how many times I return to that *Starsky and Hutch* diagram, it remains funny—in contrast to, say, the latest episode of *Joey*.) But I don't know that I have a lot more sympathy for the wet-blanket Puritanism of the anti-TV crowd.

Today being the first day of this year's [TV Turnoff Week](http://www.tvturnoff.org/index.htm), there are a [lot of articles](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0425/p08s02-comv.html) out there about what Lisa Simpson would call the "endumbening" effect of television viewing. [This interview](http://www.salon.com/ent/feature/2005/04/25/tv_b_gone/index_np.html) with Kalle Lasn, a co-founder of TV Turnoff Week who also edits the "culture-jamming" journal [Adbusters](http://www.adbusters.org/home/), focuses on the [TV-B-Gone](http://www.tvbgone.com/home.php), a hand-held remote-control device that can switch off most television sets from between 20 and 50 feet away, restoring calm to public places like airports, bars, or banks. The device seems appealingly subversive, but ultimately, its function as a tool of social control can't help but invoke the very content-based censorship that the PBS crowd so deplores. There's an inescapably patronizing tone in the marketing of the TV-B-Gone, illustrated by Lasn's explanation of why he failed to zap one bank of public screens: "I was at the airport the other day, and there was a big TV set that a number of people were watching, and for some reason I didn't want to switch it off because it was some nature show." So a football game in a bar is zapworthy, but spacing out to leopards in the Qantas terminal is A-OK? What if the nature show is violent, like the Discovery Channel's [Animal Face-Off](http://animal.discovery.com/schedule/series.jsp?series=24618&gid=0&channel=APL)? What if the zapper is not an anti-television liberal, but a right-winger offended by Will and Grace's living arrangement, or Janet Jackson's breast? Who decides?

From the vantage point of someone who watches a hell of a lot of TV (but still far less than [the average American](http://www.tvturnoff.org/factsheets.htm)), the medium seems neither like a brain-liquefying poison nor a salutary tonic. Certainly for young children, who are fresh meat for the advertising industry, the idea of a week (or an entire childhood) without TV makes a lot of sense. But shouldn't grown men and women be trusted to judge their own dosages, just as they would decide on the number of drinks they can handle at the bar? And shouldn't we choose our favorite shows because we like them, not because they force our otherwise helpless cortexes to "manag[e] resources" and "recognize long-term patterns"? There couldn't be a better time to test Steven Johnson's theory than National TV Turnoff Week—just turn the set off till Sunday and see if you get any dumber. I'd participate in the experiment myself, but in my case, watching television is definitely a smart thing to do—I get paid for it.

<http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/surfergirl/2005/04/thinkingoutside_the_idiot_box.html>