

er

FYI

"Watching TV Makes You Smarter" is adapted from Steven Johnson's book *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2005). The full article appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on April 24, 2005. Included here are its complete opening section (on TV narrative structure) and the conclusion of the essay. Johnson, a writer on media and technology topics, is also the author of *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life* (2004) and several other books.

requested
's milk."
ices that
ies.
steak or

Sleeper"

e of its
for its
: Over
versies
s por-
orture
h only
rorrist
pport-
retary
cover

rorrist
would
televi-
ge in
uring
nutes
: of 21
"story
rson-
: rela-
arra-
nutes,
ation
those
struc-
ed—
it TV

For decades, we've worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a path declining steadily toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the "masses" want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies try to give the masses what they want. But as that "24" episode suggests, the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more cognitively demanding, not less. To make sense of an episode of "24," you have to integrate far more information than you would have a few decades ago watching a comparable show. Beneath the violence and the ethnic stereotypes, another trend appears: to keep up with entertainment like "24," you have to pay attention, make inferences, track shifting social relationships. This is what I call the Sleeper Curve: the most debased forms of mass diversion—video games and violent television dramas and juvenile sitcoms—turn out to be nutritional after all.

I believe that the Sleeper Curve is the single most important new force altering the mental development of young people today, and I believe it is largely a force for good: enhancing our cognitive faculties, not dumbing them down. And yet you almost never hear this story in popular accounts of today's media. Instead, you hear dire tales of addiction, violence, mindless escapism. It's assumed that shows that promote smoking or gratuitous violence are bad for us, while those that thunder against teen pregnancy or intolerance have a positive role in society. Judged by that morality-play standard, the story of popular culture over the past 50

years—if not 500—is a story of decline: the morals of the stories have grown darker and more ambiguous, and the antiheroes have multiplied.

The usual counterargument here is that what media have lost in moral clarity, they have gained in realism. The real world doesn't come in nicely packaged public-service announcements, and we're better off with entertainment like "The Sopranos" that reflects our fallen state with all its ethical ambiguity. I happen to be sympathetic to that argument, but it's not the one I want to make here. I think there is another way to assess the social virtue of pop culture, one that looks at media as a kind of cognitive workout, not as a series of life lessons. There may indeed be more "negative messages" in the mediasphere today. But that's not the only way to evaluate whether our television shows or video games are having a positive impact. Just as important—if not more important—is the kind of thinking you have to do to make sense of a cultural experience. That is where the Sleeper Curve becomes visible.

TELEVISED INTELLIGENCE

Consider the cognitive demands that televised narratives place on their viewers. With many shows that we associate with "quality" entertainment—"The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Murphy Brown," "Frasier"—the intelligence arrives fully formed in the words and actions of the characters on-screen. They say witty things to one another and avoid lapsing into tired sitcom cliches, and we smile along in our living rooms, enjoying the company of these smart people. But assuming we're bright enough to understand the sentences they're saying, there's no intellectual labor involved in enjoying the show as a viewer. You no more challenge your mind by watching these intelligent shows than you challenge your body watching "Monday Night Football." The intellectual work is happening on-screen, not off.

But another kind of televised intelligence is on the rise. Think of the cognitive benefits conventionally ascribed to reading: attention, patience, retention, the parsing of narrative threads. Over the last half-century, programming on TV has increased the demands it places on precisely these mental faculties. This growing complexity involves three primary elements: multiple threading, flashing arrows and social networks.

According to television lore, the age of multiple threads began with the arrival in 1981 of "Hill Street

olden age but it did ight” and

erry com- t matter. d, inter- rive the ; but the probing cloric, of ’ showed they did ig room. fronting o match. hreaded fictional A. Law,”

Blue,” e only aw and nerable ed to a owever, e com- how on up to a pisode, pisode



multi- ; more action y line splays from ;” will same single vents gh the

Put those charts together, and you have a portrait of the Sleeper Curve rising over the past 30 years of popular television. In a sense, this is as much a map of cognitive changes in the popular mind as it is a map of on-screen developments, as if the media titans decided to condition our brains to follow ever-larger numbers of simultaneous threads. Before “Hill Street,” the conventional wisdom among television execs was that audiences wouldn’t be comfortable following more than three plots in a single episode, and indeed, the “Hill Street” pilot, which was shown in January 1981, brought complaints from viewers that the show was too complicated. Fast-forward two decades, and shows like “The Sopranos” engage their audiences with narratives that make “Hill Street” look like “Three’s Company.” Audiences happily embrace that complexity because they’ve been trained by two decades of multi-threaded dramas.

Multi-threading is the most celebrated structural feature of the modern television drama, and it certainly deserves some of the honor that has been doled out to it. And yet multi-threading is only part of the story . . .

[Johnson goes on to discuss how contemporary TV shows make increasing demands on viewers’ attention and intelligence by explaining fewer plot elements and forcing viewers to follow faster and more allusive dialogue. Even reality shows place greater cognitive demands on participants and viewers than in the past. Johnson’s conclusion follows.]

THE REWARDS OF SMART CULTURE

The quickest way to appreciate the Sleeper Curve’s cognitive training is to sit down and watch a few hours of hit programming from the late 70’s on Nick at Nite or the SOAPnet channel or on DVD. The modern viewer who watches a show like “Dallas” today will be bored by the content—not just because the show is less salacious than today’s soap operas (which it is by a small margin) but also because the show contains far less information in each scene, despite the fact that its soap-opera structure made it one of the most complicated narratives on television in its prime. With “Dallas,” the modern viewer doesn’t have to think to make sense of what’s going on, and not having to think is boring. Many recent hit shows—“24,” “Survivor,” “The Sopranos,” “Alias,” “Lost,” “The

Simpsons,” “E.R.”—take the opposite approach, layering each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you’re exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information, that connect multiple narrative threads.

Of course, the entertainment industry isn’t increasing the cognitive complexity of its products for charitable reasons. The Sleeper Curve exists because there’s money to be made by making culture smarter. The economics of television syndication and DVD sales mean that there’s a tremendous financial pressure to make programs that can be watched multiple times, revealing new nuances and shadings on the third viewing. Meanwhile, the Web has created a forum for annotation and commentary that allows more complicated shows to prosper, thanks to the fan sites where each episode of shows like “Lost” or “Alias” is dissected with an intensity usually reserved for Talmud scholars. Finally, interactive games have trained a new generation of media consumers to probe complex environments and to think on their feet, and that gamer audience has now come to expect the same challenges from their television shows. In the end, the Sleeper Curve tells us something about the human mind. It may be drawn toward the sensational where content is concerned—sex does sell, after all. But the mind also likes to be challenged; there’s real pleasure to be found in solving puzzles, detecting patterns or unpacking a complex narrative system.

In pointing out some of the ways that popular culture has improved our minds, I am not arguing that parents should stop paying attention to the way their children amuse themselves. What I am arguing for is a change in

CONSIDER

- 1 The title of Johnson’s article—“Watching TV Makes You Smarter”—is it? Why did you respond as you did?
- 2 Do you find Johnson’s mapping of the narrative structures of television pages 51–52.) Do you agree that multi-threaded dramas make greater demands on viewers? Why or why not?

COMPOSE

- 3 Write a short essay in which you apply the observations and claim “Watching TV Makes You Smarter” to a media activity you engage in routinely. It could be a text (books, poems, *I Love Lucy* reruns) or the multi-threaded, multi-media world of today. In either case, apply his thoughts to your world. Do you welcome them or their implications?