Home Invasion: Family Life & The Threat of Tech.

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Are our digital devices driving us apart, splintering families, distracting us from the ones who matter most? This anxiety about the role of technology in family life is a familiar one to American historians and scholars of technology. It was middle-class reformers of the early nineteenth century who first idealized family life as a domestic sanctuary, free from intrusion or commercial influences. For almost two centuries, social critics, journalists, and ordinary Americans themselves have struggled to define the proper place for devices—from telephones to radios to televisions—in home life.

From almost the moment this cosy image of home first emerged, it seemed threatened by home invaders. When “the postal revolution” occurred in the 1840s and early 1850s, and it became affordable to send letters through the mail, some commentators worried that family life would be corrupted by the outside influences that the post brought into the parlor.

When the telegraph was created, some thought this too would endanger family life because domestic peace would be constantly interrupted:

> The merchant goes home after a day of hard work and excitement to a late dinner, trying amid the family circle to forget business, when he is interrupted by a telegram from London, directing, perhaps, the purchase in San Francisco of 20,000 barrels of flour, and the poor man must dispatch his dinner as hurriedly as possible. . . .the businessman of the present day must be continually on the jump.

And later in the century, many believed the telephone brought with it ceaseless interruptions. A writer in 1881 declared that the telephone “is an affliction in a private house, ringing night and day, that few sane persons will endure.”

In the twentieth century, there were higher hopes for the radio, at least initially. Some believed it would bring families together. Many sociologists, journalists, and critics alleged that the automobile craze of the 1910s and 1920s was tearing families apart, allowing children to leave the house and their parents and go off in search of greater entertainment, often in morally questionable locales such as taverns, movie theaters, and dance halls. Many reasoned that the radio, with its dramas, music, and game shows, would serve as an antidote to these attractions and bring the young back to the more wholesome atmosphere of home life.

And in the1920s, there seemed to be evidence to back up such optimism: for instance, a resident of Muncie, Indian, told interviewers, “I don’t use my car so much any more. . . .But I spend seven nights a week on my radio.”

Social scientists of the 1930s noted that often families felt their home life was enriched by the radio. “Parents report that radio has brought the following benefits to their children: greater interest in the home, promotion of family ties, increased physical faculties, entertainment . . . .”

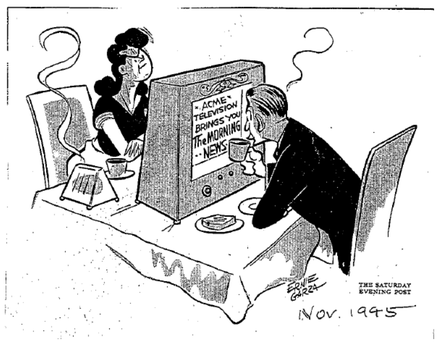
"I don't know but what I'd rather have you behind a paper than listen to that blabbering radio!"

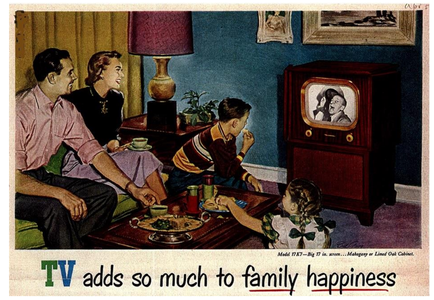
Others claimed that “radio does provide much wholesome recreation,” and celebrated the fact that “it has kept children at home more.. . .” In a 1936 study of children and radio use, scholars found that “The majority of parents affirm that the radio is not only a source of greater companionship among their children but also among themselves and their children.” However, some admitted that “at the same time, the radio is also a source of conflict and dissension in certain homes.” Some worried their children were too absorbed by radio; others complained that their spouses were.

When the television arrived in America’s living rooms in the late 1940s and 1950s, some, like Western star Hopalong Cassidy, suggested that because of TV, “instead of running around in all directions vainly seeking amusement, mother, father, sister and brother found it in the last place they’d suspect—right in their own living room. They also found that what they were seeking wasn’t entertainment at all—it was really just being close together. Our kids have fathers and mothers again, and our fathers and mothers have their kids back with them. That, I think, is the real miracle of television.”

But others disagreed, saying TV was a destructive force in family dynamics—“It is true that the American family has been brought together in the evening by television, but the bringing together is much like that old genteel custom of building a family mausoleum and bring[ing] all the folks together that way . . . .With a television there isn’t much more conversation than in entombment.”

TV’s critics claimed that not only did television diminish family interaction, but that often family members didn’t even view it together. As households acquired more than one set, families scattered.





The digital distractions we now face are, then, only the latest in a long line of gadgets that have provoked concern about the strength of the family, and whether outside influences, brought over wires, through phone lines, on TV screens, would corrupt it. These anxieties seem to be greatest during the take off period of a new technology. Every generation adds new furniture and devices to the parlor, and the longer they are there, the less they worry us. They become invisible when they have become naturalized, taken for granted.

Americans continue to strive for the image of family togetherness first celebrated by Victorian reformers. That image was always unstable, always something of a myth, for no family has been able to fully isolate itself from the outside world, nor have many wanted to. Yet just because earlier generations have faced similar worries, doesn’t mean current concerns aren’t real. Families do need to learn to balance technology use, to find ways to be together and to decide how much of the outer world they want to let enter the inner family circle.