

TASTE

# Push-Button Putsch

*By Cameron Stracher*

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Once upon a time, silence was golden. In those halcyon days, phones had cords, cable was something that carried a ski-slope gondola, and the Internet was a gleam in Al Gore's eye. But then came boomboxes, car alarms, pagers and cellphones. Soon, you couldn't sit, stroll, shop or commute -- let alone attend a concert or movie -- without something beeping, buzzing, squawking or talking nearby. Televisions appeared everywhere, even in elevators and taxis. There was no peace, no respite for the fun-saturated or information-weary.

Now, as if the Invasion of the Electronic Gadgets has not gone far enough, the FCC is considering relaxing the ban on the use of wireless devices on airplanes. It is only a matter of time before nothing is out of range for the annoying chatterers of the digital class.

Enter Mitch Altman.

Mr. Altman is the geek who invented TV B-Gone, a device that just may save Western Civilization. TV B-Gone is a remote control with just one function: It shuts TVs off. One press of the button, and TV B-Gone spits out an infra-red stream of the most popular television remote codes for "off." When San Francisco-based Cornfield Electronics introduced the gizmo on Oct. 19, it sold out the first batch in two days. Since then, more than 18,000 have been sold.

I used Mr. Altman's magic wand last Saturday night in a crowded restaurant and switched off two TV sets over the bar that were playing some sports game I had no interest in watching. It was delicious, naughty and, I'm sure, annoying. The patrons looked around as if for a gremlin. Little did they know he was sitting right next to them, sipping a beer. When they turned a television back on, I switched it off again. Eventually, they shook their heads and gave up. Score one point for silence.

"We have all these devices that are supposed to help people communicate," says Mr. Altman, "but they have the effect of keeping people isolated." Anyone who has ever sat at a meeting while the person next to him fires off messages with a Blackberry knows what he means. A crowded room can be an empty place when everyone is text-messaging.

Even city streets, which used to be a veritable Petri dish for communication, are being overrun by headsets and Blue Tooth-enabled cell phones that allow people to walk, talk and chew gum while ignoring everyone around them. Get in a cab, and the driver is chatting away, but not with you. The advent of the Internet has only made matters worse, as children retreat to their rooms to surf the Web and IM their friends, whereas at least there used to be a fighting chance to get them into the family room to watch "Seinfeld."

Years ago, in "The Lonely Crowd," sociologist David Riesman wrote about the threat to personal freedom posed by conformism and homogeneity in American society. As Prof.

Riesman saw it, our national character had become "outer directed," with men in gray suits currying favor in the corporate environment.

This desire to please others represented a sea change from the "inner directed" personality of the early and middle phases of the Industrial Revolution. If the inner-directed person was guided by an internal gyroscope that guided him toward a personal vision of success, the outer-directed person was guided, instead, by radar that measured success by how others perceived him. Today's noisy doodads are nothing but the electronic manifestation of Prof. Riesman's concerns writ large.

What are television, e-mail, chat rooms and blogs if not our lonely selves reaching out for comfort, approval, feedback and distracting noise? The lie of each is that we can somehow feel connected by engaging in activities that are, at their heart, isolating. All the Nielsen ratings, page hits, crowded in-boxes and voice mails cannot disguise the fact that when the power is off, we are alone.

When I shut down the television in the crowded bar, a remarkable thing happened. People turned to each other and resumed their conversation, just as they must have been doing before someone had the smart idea to hang a TV above the beer bottles in the first place. A bar, after all, is a place to meet people and converse, with the assistance of a social lubricant -- alcohol.

Television in particular allows us to avoid conversation by focusing our attention on a screen instead of people. Even the limited conversations it has engendered have been splintered, of late, by niche channels and "on-demand" broadcasting. And as the world gets noisier, a kind of silence grows. Not the good kind -- the book under a tree on a Sunday afternoon kind -- but the silence that happens to people who have nothing to speak about except what's on the Bikini Channel. Better to kill it before it swallows us whole.

But why just kill television? What about a device that zaps cellphones dead? Call it Cell B-Gone. Or consider Crackberry B-Gone. Or Palm B-Gone. Or anything aimed at all the annoying electronic gadgets that purport to make our lives better but actually ruin them. Mr. Altman says that he has received many requests to invent such devices, although the only one that he is seriously considering is "Boombox B-Gone."

There are companies that manufacture blocking devices for cellphones, although they are illegal in the U.S. I'd pay good money for Playstation B-Gone and double that for Gameboy B-Gone. It's useful to imagine these B-Gones, even if they are never invented, and to imagine what our lives would be like if every cellphone conversation didn't begin with "Hey! I'm on the train!" and end with "Hello?"

What if we were forced to interact with real live people rather than digits or pixels? Would we be happier? Would we be lonelier? Would we miss our toys? I suspect we'd get along just fine. For one thing, we'd never have to listen to another conversation about what the guy with the Blue Tooth ear bud was having for dinner.

In the Pete Seeger folksong "Abiyoyo," a father can make anything disappear with a wave of his magic wand. For his skill (and his annoying pranks), his neighbors banish him to the outskirts of town. One day, a terrible monster named Abiyoyo arrives. He menaces the entire village, swallowing entire sheep in a single gulp. But the father, with the help of his son -- who plays a song to make the monster dizzy until he finally has to sit down -- zaps Abiyoyo right out of their lives. For his good deed, his former neighbors carry him back into town, and make him a hero.

Surely Mitch Altman is one, too.

**Mr. Stracher is the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review.**

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