

Internet Kills the Television Blahs

By Farai Chideya, AlterNet

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Over my eggs, toast, and coffee, I watched the last night's bombing raids, big red blooms of fireballs. Interspersed were animated graphics of military maneuvers and equipment, like a sophisticated, nihilistic video game.

As hard as I tried, I couldn't look away. Television is mesmeric, engaging, and according to scientific research, addictive. Last February in *Scientific American*, award-winning researchers Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presented their findings on television addiction. It's a term they reluctantly came to accept because the viewing patterns of Americans (who average 3+ hours per day) fit the classic definition. No shocker here: We feel relaxed while we're channel surfing. But Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi were surprised that "the sense of relaxation ends when the set is turned off, but the feelings of passivity and lowered alertness continue." In other words, we end up feeling slodgy and powerless right after a big TV binge.

But online news consumers have found a very different – and highly active – way of getting their information. Some of the most sophisticated news consumers, including progressives worldwide, have become the "blog"-era equivalent of news editors. By both receiving and distributing information via email, they vote with the click of a mouse on what information matters.

"It's nice to have these 'intelligent agents' – my friends and list neighbors – passing along the worthiest columns and news stories," says musician and radio producer David Gans. He receives information via listservs, discussions boards, and the online community The Well, whose Media conference he hosts. Individuals like Gans, informed and discerning about what they send out, become hubs in this distributed information network.

Net use has grown exponentially since the first Gulf War – the "television war" – a decade ago. Says Australian writer Richard Evans, "I prefer [online news] to watching television as I have more control of the kinds of images and stories I read. I also use the Google news service as a way of getting a quick overview of a variety of sources." Studies also show that Americans find the web outlets of major media (like CNN.com) more trustworthy than their parents.

Print and online publications that make it easy for readers to forward material have seen a jump in traffic. The New York Times sends out 3.7 million headline alerts each day. But their "Most Emailed Articles" feature – which allows online readers to see what other readers have forwarded – has come into its own. New York Times Digital spokesperson Christine Mohan says that in March, the highest-traffic month so far, the average number of articles emailed was about seventy-five thousand per day. But in the days preceding the war, readers emailed up to 120,000 stories daily. "When you send something to your colleague, the person is much more likely to open it. It's that inherent trust," says Mohan.

Novelist Danzy Senna ("Caucasia") uses the New York Times' system to email articles to friends and family. She also passes on alerts about upcoming peace marches and acts

of civil disobedience. Judging by online outreach for recent peace rallies, the ability to customize and control the flow of information produces action as well as education. And alternative news sources may have benefited from the online news surge even more than major-media ones. In my admittedly unscientific survey of individuals who received and forwarded war-related news, most (including Senna) sent and received more independent than major-media coverage.

The downside? Not all information is credible. Web producer Emily Gertz finds some people on progressive listservs passing bad information on. "As part of harnessing the power of networked information," she says, "there needs to be a steady level of education about net resources and etiquette from those of us who've been online for a long time (in my case, over ten years)."

People who forward too much volume or too little of interest find people begging off their lists. And unique or "sticky" information, like Tamim Ansary's letter about Afghanistan after 9/11, travels the world lightening quick, which opens the door for clever hoaxes.

The system is largely self-correcting, however – and growing. The only thing that could block news "intelligent agents" from their mission is the question of revenue. For now, most outlets don't charge for accessing or forwarding information, happy simply that they're getting more eyeballs. In this world, readers and publishers share the burden of distribution. Online information fans have turned Fox News's slogan on its ear, telling outlets "You Report, The World Decides."

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