



REMOTELY CONTROLLED

***Too much screen-time
is hurting our kids***

by Mike Cooney

A CONVERSATION WITH ARIC SIGMAN



Do you realise that, by the time you're 75, you'll have probably spent more than 12 years of your life staring at the television set?

In case you missed it, *that's 12 years!*

It all started just eight decades ago, when John Logie Baird transmitted an image for the first time over the air-waves. Since then, TV has become one of the greatest influences on humanity – ever! From affluent western countries to tiny African villages, billions of people around the world spend countless hours with a remote in hand, eyes glued to the screen. Family evenings and mealtimes often revolve around it. And, in many homes, television has a greater hold over children than *parents* do!

Psychologist and author Dr Aric Sigman was in Godzone recently, sharing some compelling insights into what he calls, “*the greatest health scandal of our age.*” Using up-to-the-minute scientific evidence, he argued that watching television isn't the harmless activity most people think.

So we tracked him down (an American now living in the UK) and popped a few questions – wondering if we might be told to throw our TV sets out the window:

GRAPEVINE: Firstly, of all the possible topics in the world, what on earth prompted you to choose TV?

ARIC: Well, I do a lot of travelling – especially to more remote countries which either don't have television, or television has just arrived. And I guess it was realising what life is like when television *isn't* a part of your culture – unlike New Zealand or England. It was also hearing from teachers, doctors, parents and policemen what happens when TV does arrive. It clearly has a big effect.

I have children myself. And around the same time I started spotting articles

in medical journals about television – which was a new thing. We used to think of TV as a subject you'd find in cultural or media-studies journals. But when you start seeing it in *medical* journals, you pay attention! And, interestingly, the findings had nothing to do with the content of what children are watching, but the *effects* – based upon the age at which they started and the number of hours they were watching per day.

This was a huge departure from the way we've thought about television in the past, and I realised: there's a silent health issue going on here which isn't being addressed.

GRAPEVINE: So you ended up with a book that pulled all the research together – right?

ARIC: Exactly. Often without realising it, scientists from different areas of the biosciences were coming to similar conclusions. And I felt that it was important to collate those ideas.

In particular, I wanted to draw people's attention to this dose/response relationship – a medical principal applying to normal, physical diseases which also seems to apply to screen-time.

DOSE/RESPONSE

I'm not telling people to throw their televisions out. However, the younger that kids start watching television and the more hours they watch, the more likely they are to suffer the effects – and the more intense the effects are.

I feel that parents should make informed decisions when they're bringing up their children. I mean, parents everywhere make decisions about what their children eat, how many hours of sleep they get, whether or not they need sunscreen at the beach ... they make these decisions all the time! And I believe that screen-time is just one more issue that parents deserve to be informed about.

Unfortunately, up until now, they simply haven't been given the information ...

GRAPEVINE: Why don't we hear about this? Are you suggesting there's some deep, dark conspiracy going on?

ARIC: Maybe! However, television's unique in that, no matter where they sit politically, every mover and shaker needs it for their career. They need to be liked

by the media. And since most newspapers have financial links to television networks (they either own TV networks, or TV networks own them – at least that's how it is in Britain and the US) the other forms of media are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them. In other words, they don't want people to think too badly about television!

GRAPEVINE: You claim that the average time spent watching TV is about four hours per day. Would that be true here in New Zealand?

ARIC: I asked one of your television executives that question, and it's probably slightly lower. Perhaps that's because of your weather! But remember, I'm talking about 'live broadcast' time – not movies and DVDs. In the UK at the moment, people are watching TV four hours and eighteen minutes on average every day, of just *broadcast television* time.

GRAPEVINE: And if you were to include DVDs, the Internet, etc?

ARIC: Well, it's going up as we speak – especially for young people! One study by the British Market Research Bureau found that for 11-15 year olds, on average, it's seven-and-a-half hours a day of electronic media. That's average! And that's 53 hours a week!

GRAPEVINE: Are kids watching less television now, because of the increased internet usage – especially with things like *Facebook*?

ARIC: Unfortunately, that's not true. Yes, they're doing more social networking, but they're also watching more television. So both statistics are going up. And they're also starting at a younger age.

By the age of seven, the average child would've spent a year in front of a

screen – that's a full year of 24hr-days of their life.

GRAPEVINE: But hang on ... We thought computers were a good thing to have – that they're even educational!

ARIC: Let me put this in context. I'm a fully grown adult. I have a brand new *iMac* – and I think *Google* is wonderful! The computer is an incredibly useful tool. However, its effects on a developing child are very different to that of an adult.

EDUCATIONAL?

When children are growing, they need to develop sustained attention or concentration. But what screen-time does – even if it's used for education – is cultivate the opposite of that, which is divided attention or multi-tasking.

Surfing the net with its quick page-changes is exactly what children don't need when their brains are developing.

Interestingly, since I wrote my book, *Remotely Controlled*, a couple of huge studies have looked again at the idea that computers are educational. In America this year 150,000 pupils took part in research where half of them were given computers to use at home for education-only, and the other half weren't. The outcome was very clear: the computer-kids' grades – particularly English and maths – went *down*. The same thing was found in Romania this year.

Another very big study in 2004 of about 15 European countries found that the use of computers in classrooms did

not improve performance – but, in fact, was linked with worse performance in both maths and reading!

So this idea that computers in some way enhance education is something we adults have imposed upon children – because we find them very useful. But children's brains need to develop certain skills first *before* they go on to use tools like computers.

GRAPEVINE: In a nutshell, then, why should parents be concerned about the amount of screen-time their kids enjoy?

ARIC: Firstly, 80% of brain-growth occurs between the ages of 0-to-3. That's when most of the brain's connections are formed. So it's vital that, during this stage, children experience as many of the key things needed for healthy brain development as possible. Television and other screen media are, unfortunately, displacing these necessary things. Hours spent sitting in the virtual world are hours that, prior to television, kids used to spend face-to-face, physically touching, tasting and moving in their environment.

Secondly, they're now finding that screen-time actually causes biological changes in humans – particularly children. And these changes range from things like attention damage to actual changes in the bloodstream. And the research is getting very specific, naming the chemical compounds that are changing – like LDL and HDL cholesterol levels, and insulin.

The evidence clearly shows that the number of hours spent in front of the



screen is directly related to increasingly negative health and educational outcomes. So yes, we should be concerned. Something is going on, both in terms of television *displacing* important parts of a child's development, and also *distorting* that development.

GRAPEVINE: One of the more intriguing links with television exposure that you refer to is premature puberty – particularly in girls. Can TV really do that?

ARIC: Yes, there's considerable international evidence suggesting this is happening – including two separate studies of 17,000 American girls and 14,000 British. They found one-in-six girls with signs of puberty by the time they were eight years old – compared to one-in-100 a generation ago!

Now, the route by which this happens is still unclear. However, it's known that children who watch a lot of television produce less melatonin – and low melatonin levels may promote the early onset of puberty. It's also suspected that the increase in sexual images on TV can actually foster sexual maturity among prepubescent girls – a little like the way images of food can make your mouth water.

As one researcher put it: "... *this is a serious public health issue.*"

GRAPEVINE: Televisions are so cheap and compact nowadays that plenty of kids have got them in their bedrooms. You strongly discourage that – why?

ARIC: Well, there's no doubt that we need to reduce time spent in front of a screen. We need to think of screen-time in the same way as we do lollies or sweets: how much do we let them have? In other words, how many hours of television a day do we want for our children? One of

the easiest ways to achieve this is by not putting screens in their bedrooms. (This of course is easier to do when they're young!)

IT'S NOT ROCKET-SCIENCE:

If you put a fridge in a child's room, they're going to eat more. If you put a screen in their room, they're going to watch more. And you won't always know what they're watching! So keep televisions and computers out of their bedrooms. It'll make life a lot easier ...

GRAPEVINE: Lots of us love nothing more than to come home after a hard day's work and blob out in front of the telly. It feels so relaxing. Surely this is a good way to unwind?

ARIC: Sorry to disappoint, but the findings generally are no! It seems to be pacifying, but it isn't relaxing. And the reason, probably, is that while on the one hand you're lying there trying to relax, you're actually being stimulated! So it leaves you feeling rather odd ...

Again, I'm not saying you shouldn't watch television. But if you're asking me: is it more relaxing than going for a walk, or reading a book, or doing some gardening? – the answer's likely to be no.

The problem, of course, is that watching TV is *easier* – because you're lying back in a chair and staring at something!

Look at it this way: I know that broccoli is a lot healthier than chocolate, right? But, on occasions, I will still eat the chocolate bar. I accept the fact that it's just recreational junk food, but I enjoy it and it tastes good. However, we don't seem to be able to do this with television. We



make up cheap excuses to try to justify the intellectual, cognitive and medical benefits of television – instead of simply saying, “Yes, it’s just recreation. But we enjoy it – end of story.”

GRAPEVINE: You obviously touch a raw nerve when you talk about television damaging our lives – and people do get defensive. How come? Is this some sort of ‘sacred cow’?

ARIC: Well, when you’re discussing the effects of television, people who’ve got children often feel guilty. They wrongly interpret what you’re saying as, “You’re a bad parent and you’re damaging your children!” And when you start looking at the sheer number of hours adults are spending in front of the screen, you start casting doubt on the biggest waking activity in the world. And that can be insulting, I guess!

When most New Zealanders go to their grave at the age of 75, they would’ve spent at least 12½ years (of 24-hours-a-day) watching broadcast television alone! But that’s not something people like to hear – especially when you tell them they may have harmed themselves in the process!

Look, adults must be allowed to make their own decisions. But most people don’t fully understand what the medical world knows about this issue. They understand about the ozone layer and the effects of passive smoking, but they know nothing about the single most popular activity after sleeping and working.

GRAPEVINE: The evidence seems pretty convincing – that too much TV is not good for kids. But where’s the proof that we

adults have anything to be worried about?

ARIC: New studies out this year have been looking at the increased risks from a variety of diseases and early death – and the findings are very compelling. For example, for each daily hour of television that you watch, there’s an 18% increase in death from heart disease, and an 11% increase in overall mortality (death from any cause).

RISKY? FOR SURE:

Let’s look at it this way: if you’re watching four or more hours of TV per day, you are 80% more likely to die of heart disease than if you watch two hours or less – and you’re 46% more likely to die of any cause.

GRAPEVINE: Ouch! Those are pretty scary stats ...?

ARIC: Absolutely! And this isn’t from some comic book. This was published by the American Heart Association (in their journal called ‘Circulation’). I mean, this is a heavy-duty study done by heavy-duty scientists – and nobody ever hears about this stuff!

GRAPEVINE: What about the link with obesity? Is it because we’re sitting down becoming couch-potatoes?

ARIC: There’s a clear link with screen-time (no matter what we watch) and body fat. And it isn’t just because we’re sitting down for several hours a day. Watching TV causes us to burn fewer calories – it lowers our metabolism. And it also seems to change our ability to feel full by interfering with what’s called our ‘satiating



mechanism' – so we continue to eat even though we're not hungry. It seems that, while we're watching the screen, non-food cues distract our brain from paying attention to the food cues – in other words, the message that our stomachs are full and our bloodstreams are crammed with sugar doesn't seem to be getting through.

GRAPEVINE: So, maybe one of the easiest ways to lose weight is to just cut our TV time?

ARIC: Exactly! And if you substitute those hours for something like gardening, you'll be healthier, happier *and* slimmer as well!

GRAPEVINE: Your concerns are more about screen-time – right? – than the content of television programmes. But content is not unimportant, surely?

ARIC: No. There's plenty of evidence that television content also plays a role. For example, we're currently seeing record levels of body-dissatisfaction amongst women and girls. And the worrying thing is that the age at which girls start to hate their bodies has dropped dramatically. The latest study is showing that 50% of girls between the ages of 3-to-6 think they're too fat – and a high proportion of them would love to change their weight.

Now this hasn't happened before in our history!

In three separate studies in different parts of the world, the exact same findings are coming through. Unlike males, female's brains change immediately when they see slim images on a TV screen – specifically the parts of the brain which exhibit self-loathing, alarm and anxiety.

GRAPEVINE: And this happens to healthy, confident women as well?

ARIC: Absolutely. Their brains are

impacted immediately and powerfully. For example, how many New Zealand women think that they're unattractive and fat – even if they're not? Studies are showing clearly that it's to do with screen-time.

Women, traditionally, used to measure how attractive they looked – their body shape, etc – on seeing other women. And that self-evaluation would usually take place with women in their own community – which would be about 150 others in their 'meeting pool', as we'd call it. But what's happening now is that they're being artificially given thousands of comparisons – with women hundreds of miles away. They're being broadcast on a screen every day, and nearly all of their body sizes are *below normal!*

So it's distorting the process, leaving them feeling less attractive and fat. And this has really serious implications for relationships, dieting, eating disorders and so forth.

GRAPEVINE: Okay then, let's get practical. Just how much television is safe?

ARIC: The French government has recently outlawed the broadcast of all television for children under three years old – and they don't care if it's *Teletubbies* or any of those so-called educational programmes! French doctors, despite how unpopular this might be (I mean, it's a sure vote-loser!), are completely convinced.

THE X-FACTOR

The Belgium government now has huge posters inside their nurseries and pre-school units showing a television screen with a big 'X' in front of it, saying, "Don't let your children see electronic media until they are three years old."

The US Government's 'health-goal' over the next 10 years is to ensure that children under two see no screen media at all – and children between 2-and-18 years see a maximum of two hours a day.

So, ideally, up until the age of three, I would keep screen-time to a minimum – and if you can cut it out altogether, even better.

If your children are going to watch things at that age (and even older), slow editing-speeds are absolutely important. Programmes like *Thomas the Tank Engine*, where there's one voice and the movement is slow – or something with a narrator telling you a story – those kind of programmes are preferable.

Remember: don't confuse what children find exciting with what's good for them!

GRAPEVINE: What about older kids ... teenagers ... and even us adults?

ARIC: Basically, you need to think of screen-time as something that needs to be limited – for older children and adults as well. The health experts are recommending two hours a day. And it doesn't matter which medium your kids are using: just call it all 'screen-time'. Then you can allocate to them 'x' number of hours or minutes a day. Whether they use it watching TV or a DVD, or spend it on *Facebook* or video games ... it's up to them.

Of course, just like getting the right servings of vegetables into kids each day, it's not always easy to achieve! But, it's better to have a frame of reference that you don't always attain, than no guidelines whatsoever.

GRAPEVINE: There are probably lots of parents, about now, who are wondering how they're ever going to cope without

their favourite babysitter! I mean, sitting the kids down in front of TV was so easy!

ARIC: I know. But let's face the facts. The idea that, if our children don't have television to occupy themselves, they'll be unmanageable – that's never been true before in our history. I mean, our grandparents certainly didn't use it!

We don't give children enough credit for being able to entertain and occupy themselves. And we don't understand the *importance of boredom*.

Boredom is the raw material used to build self-awareness – and children need time to read, write, draw, create, fantasise, think and explore their interests. Too many structured activities allow little time for this type of self-generated development. And research clearly shows that children are becoming less imaginative because they watch too much TV.

BOREDOM IS GOOD!

We must allow our kids to get bored so that their brains are forced to keep themselves busy. Lots of parents are terrified of this – they don't believe that children could possibly entertain themselves. But they're wrong!

Children, even if you give them a can of baked beans, will always find some way to occupy themselves! They're naturally nosy, and their imaginations can be jump-started – as long as we leave the intellectual space for them to begin the process.

GRAPEVINE: Tell us about the 'potting-shed effect' – and how that can balance the effects of screen-time?

ARIC: Well, lots of research has found



that time spent by our children in the 'green outdoors' has physiological benefits – their ability to pay attention and concentrate improves, as does their behaviour, school performance and levels of aggression. And, again, this is not some flimsy, holistic, alternative view of children: this comes from very conservative medical sources, like *The American Journal of Public Health*.

So green-time seems to be a fantastic and easy way to counteract the effects of screen-time in our modern world.

GRAPEVINE: Do our kids have to go 'bush' to get this?

ARIC: No. Simply going out into the backyard or the garden or the potting-shed, for at least 20 minutes, is fine – even a local park or football field. Apparently the green from plants and trees and grass seems to be sufficient!

GRAPEVINE: Any final thoughts?

ARIC: In the end, perhaps, it won't be the hundreds of scientific studies that determine how you think of your television set. So this question might help:

If you were on your deathbed and someone could give you back those missing 12½ years – to be with people you love, and maybe do things differently – would you take up their offer? Or would you say, "No thanks. I'm glad I spent that time watching TV!" ...? ❁

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