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Mediasprawl: Springfield U.S.A

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Douglas Rushkoff

The Simpsons are the closest thing in America to a national media literacy program. By pretending to be a kids' cartoon, the show gets away with murder: that is, the virtual murder of our most coercive media iconography and techniques. For what began as entertaining interstitial material for an alternative network variety show has revealed itself, in the twenty-first century, as nothing short of a media revolution.

Maybe that's the very reason *The Simpsons* works so well. *The Simpsons* were born to provide *The Tracey Ullman Show* with a way of cutting to commercial breaks. Their very function as a form of media was to bridge the discontinuity inherent to broadcast television. They existed to pave over the breaks. But rather than dampening the effects of these gaps in the broadcast stream, they heightened them. They acknowledged the jagged edges and recombinant forms behind the glossy patina of American television and, by doing so, initiated its deconstruction. They exist in the outlying suburbs of the American media landscape: the hinterlands of the Fox network. And living as they do—simultaneously a part of yet separate from the mainstream, primetime fare—they are able to bear witness to our cultural formulations and then comment upon them.

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Consider, for a moment, the way we thought of media before this cartoon family quite literally satirized us into consciousness. Media used to be a top-down affair. A few rich guys in suits sat in offices at the tops of tall buildings and decided which stories would be in the headlines or on the evening news and how they would be told. As a result, we came to think of information as something that got fed to us from above. We counted on the editors of the *New York Times* to deliver “all the news that’s fit to print” and Walter Cronkite to tell us “that’s the way it was.” We had no reason not to trust the editorial decisions of the media managers upon whom we depended to present, accurately, what was going on in the world around us. In fact, most of us didn’t even realize such decisions were being made at all. The TV became America’s unquestioned window to the world, as *The Simpsons*’ opening sequence—which shows each family member rushing home to gather at the TV set—plainly acknowledges.

But we call the stuff on television programming for a reason. No, television programmers are not programming television sets or evening schedules; they’re programming the viewers. Whether they are convincing us to buy a product, vote for a candidate, adopt an ideology, or simply confirm a moral platitude, the underlying reason for making television is to hold onto our attention and then sell us a bill of goods. Since the time of the Bible and Aristotle through today’s over-determined three-act action movies, the best tool at the programmer’s disposal has been the story. But thanks to interactive technologies like the remote control, and cynical attitudes like Bart Simpson’s, the story just doesn’t hold together anymore.

For the most part, television stories program their audiences by bringing them into a state of tension. The author creates a character we like and gets us to identify with the hero’s plight. Then the character is put into jeopardy of one sort or another. As the character moves up the incline plane towards crisis, we follow him vicariously, while taking on his anxiety as our own. Helplessly we follow him into danger, disease, or divorce, and just when we can’t take any more tension without bursting, our hero finds a way out. He finds a moral, a product, an agenda, or a strategy—the one preferred by the screenwriter or his sponsor, of course—that rescues him from danger and his audience from the awful vicarious anxiety. Then everyone lives happily ever after. This is what it means to “enter-tain”—literally “to hold within”—and it only works on a captive audience.

In the old days of television, when a character would get into danger, the viewer had little choice but to submit. To change the channel would have required getting up out of the La-Z-Boy chair, walking up to the television set, and turning the dial. 50 calories of human effort. That’s too much effort for a man of Homer’s generation, anyway.

The remote control changed all that. With an expenditure of, perhaps, .0001 calories, the anxious viewer is liberated from tortuous imprisonment and free to watch another program. Although most well-behaved adult viewers will soldier on through a story, kids raised with remotes in their hands have much less reverence for well-crafted story arcs and zap away without a moment’s hesitation. Instead of watching one program, they skim through ten at a time. They don’t watch TV, they watch the television, guiding their own paths through the entirety of media rather

than following the prescribed course of any one programmer. No matter how much we complain about our kids' short attention spans or even their Attention Deficit Disorders, their ability to disconnect from programming has released them from the hypnotic spell of even the best TV mesmerizers.

The Nintendo joystick further empowers them while compounding the programmer's dilemma. In the old days, the TV image was unchangeable. Gospel truth piped into the home from the top of some glass building. Today, kids have the experience of manipulating the image on the screen. This has fundamentally altered their perception of and reverence for the television image. Just as the remote control allows viewers to deconstruct the television image, the joystick has demystified the pixel itself. The newsreader is just another middle-aged man manipulating his joystick. Hierarchy and authority are diminished, and the programmers' weapons neutralized. Sure, they might sit back and watch a program now and again, but they do so voluntarily and with full knowledge of their complicity. It is not an involuntary surrender.

A person who is doing rather than receiving is much less easily provoked into a state of tension. The people I call "screenagers," those raised with interactive devices in their media arsenals, are natives in a mediaspace where even the best television producers are immigrants. Like Bart, they speak the language better and see through those clumsy attempts to program them into submission. They never forget for a moment that they are watching media and resent those who try to draw them in and sell them something. They will not be part of a "target market." At least not without a fight.

So, then, what kind of television does appeal to such an audience? Programs that celebrate the screenager's irreverence for the image, while providing a new sort of narrative arc for the sponsor-wary audience. It's the ethos and behavior embodied by screenager role-model and anti-hero Bart Simpson. His name intended as an anagram for "brat," Bart embodies youth culture's ironic distance from media and its willingness to dissemble and re-splice even the most sacred meme constructs. With the plastic safety of his incarnation as an animated character, Bart can do much more than just watch and comment on media iconography. Once a media figure has entered his animated world, Bart can interact with it, satirize it, or even become it. Although *The Simpsons* began on adult television, these animated tidbits became more popular than the live-action portion of *The Tracey Ullman Show* and Fox decided to give the Simpson family their own series. It is not coincidental that what began as a bridging device between a show and its commercials—a media paste—developed into a self-similar media pastiche.

The Simpsons' creator, comic-strip artist Matt Groening (rhymes with "rain-ing"), has long understood the way to mask his countercultural agenda. "I find you can get away with all sorts of unusual ideas if you present them with a smile on your face," he said in an early 1990s interview. In fact, the show's mischievous ten-year-old protagonist is really just the screen presence of Groening's true inner nature. For his self-portrait in a *Spin* magazine article, Groening simply drew a picture of Bart and then scribbled the likeness of his own glasses and beard over it. Bart functions as Matt Groening's "smile," and the child permits him—and the show's

young, Harvard-educated writing staff—to get away with a hell of a lot.

The Simpsons takes place in a town called Springfield, named after the fictional location of *Father Knows Best*, making it clear that the Simpson family is meant as a '90s answer to the media reality presented to us in the '50s and '60s. Suburban sitcoms of those decades, like *Father Knows Best*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and even *The Brady Bunch*, all tended to promote life in the suburbs as somehow more wholesome than the city for a postwar American family. In the 'burbs, there was time and room to work out the family's problems, all in the safety of an ample living room and at the arm of daddy's big chair. The ability of these families to solve their problems in half-an-hour at the most was really an advertisement for the suburbs. These shows made it okay for daddy to go all the way to the city to work and only show up at home by nightfall. Evenings and weekends were all the fathering these children required. Besides, equipped with 1950s space age technologies in the home, such as washing machines and canister vacuums, mommies were empowered to wrestle with more important matters once left for dad: meetings with teachers, driving the kids to baseball practice, and, of course, keeping up on local gossip. It shouldn't be surprising that along with Levittown and its built-in televisions rose the sitcom, pandering to its new constituency while advertising the appliances of GE and Westinghouse as well as the lifestyle and happiness they promised. In fact, the utopian fantasy of these programs did depend on the selling of more washing machines and television sets. Our postwar economy was busy absorbing hundreds of thousands of veterans while relegating women back to the kitchen. A consumer culture needed to be developed by any means necessary.

But if *Father Knows Best* was a hopeful projection into the future, *The Simpsons* is what actually came to pass. *The Simpsons* is the American media family turned on its head, told from the point of view of not the smartest member of the family, but the most ironic. Audiences delight in watching Bart effortlessly outwit his parents, teachers, and local institutions. This show is so irreverent that it provoked an attack from George Bush, who pleaded for the American family to be more like the Waltons than the Simpsons. The show's writers quickly responded, letting Bart say during one episode, "Hey, man, we're just like the Waltons. Both families are praying for an end to the depression."

The show shares many of the viral features of other '90s programs. Murphy Brown's office dartboard, for example, was used as a meme slot; in each episode it has a different satirical note pinned to it. *The Simpsons'* writers also create little slots for the most attentive viewers to glean extra memes. The opening credits always begin with Bart writing a different message on his classroom bulletin board and contain a different saxophone solo from his sister, Lisa. Every episode has at least one film reenactment, usually from Hitchcock or Kubrick, to satirize an aspect of the modern cultural experience. In a spoof of modern American child care, writers re-created a scene from *The Birds*, except here Homer Simpson rescues his baby daughter from a daycare center by passing through a playground of menacingly perched babies.

These media references form the basis for the show's role as a media literacy primer. The joy of traditional television storytelling is simply getting to the ending.

The reward is making it through to the character's escape from danger. While most episodes of *The Simpsons* incorporate a dramatic nod to such storytelling conventions, the screenagers watching the program couldn't care less about whether Principal Skinner gets married or Homer finds his donut. These story arcs are there for the adult viewers only. No, the pleasure of watching *The Simpsons* for its media-literate (read: younger) viewers is the joy of pattern recognition. The show provides a succession of "a-ha" moments—those moments when we recognize which other forms of media are being parodied. We are rewarded with self-congratulatory laughter whenever we make a connection between the scene we are watching and the movie, commercial, or television program on which it is based.

The Simpsons serves as an alternative strategy for dealing with both virtual suburbs of the television dial and the very real suburbs of Springfield, U.S.A. The pervasive choice in confronting the monotony of planned residential communities is to invent theme environments and then superimpose them over the otherwise bland. A steak house becomes an Outback Australian theme environment and a strip mall becomes the Wild West. Like the narrative and happy ending superimposed on the otherwise random and utterly meaningless day of a suburban family in a 1950s sitcom, these manufactured realities combat the underlying dearth of cultural evolution or any foundation whatsoever. In this sense, *The Simpsons* deconstructs and informs the media soup of which it is a part. Rather than drawing us into the hypnotic spell of the traditional storyteller, the program invites us to make active and conscious comparisons of its own scenes with those of other, less transparent media forms. By doing so, the show's writers help us in our efforts to develop immunity to their coercive effects. By deconstructing the narrative veneer of the media with which it cohabitates, *The Simpsons* re-urbanizes the media suburbs. It adds a first layer of reflection: a bracket of self-consciousness through which a genuine relationship between us and its characters can begin. And what we have in common is that we all live in the artificially quantified themepark of the American suburbs.

The show's supervisors through *The Simpsons*' golden years of the mid-1990s, Mike Reiss and Al Jean, were both *Harvard Lampoon* veterans. When I met with them on the Fox lot, they told me how they delighted in animation's ability to serve as a platform for sophisticated social and media satire. "About two thirds of the writers have been Harvard graduates," explained Jean, "so it's one of the most literate shows on TV." "We take subjects on the show," added Reiss, who was Jean's classmate, "that we can parody. Homer goes to college or onto a game show. We'll take Super Bowl Sunday and then parody the Bud Bowl and how merchants capitalize on the event." Having been raised on media themselves, the Diet Coke-drinking, baseball-jacketed pair gravitate toward parodying the media aspects of the subjects they pick. They did not comment on social issues as much as they did the media imagery around a particular social issue. "These days television in general seems to be feeding on itself, parodying itself," Jean told me. "Some of the most creative stuff we write comes from just having the Simpsons watch TV." Which they often did.

Many episodes are still about what happens on the Simpsons' own TV set,

allowing the characters to feed off television, which itself is feeding off other television. In this self-reflexive circus, it is only Bart who refuses to be fooled by anything. His father, Homer, represents an earlier generation and can easily be manipulated by TV commercials and publicity stunts like clear beer. “Homer certainly falls for every trick,” admitted Reiss, “even believing the Publishers Clearing House mailing that he is a winner.” When Homer acquired an illegal cable TV hookup, he became so addicted to the tube that he almost died. Lisa, the brilliant member of the family, maintains a faith in the social institutions of her world, works hard to get good grades in school, and even entered and won a Reader’s Digest essay contest about patriotism. “But Lisa feels completely alienated by the media around her,” Jean warned me.

The writers empathize with her more than any other character. She has a more intellectual reaction to how disquieting her life has become. When Homer believes he may die from a heart attack, he tells the children, “I have some terrible news.” Lisa answers, “Oh, we can take anything. We’re the MTV generation. We feel neither highs nor lows.” Homer asks what it’s like, and she just goes, “Eh.” It was right out there.

Bart’s reaction to his cultural alienation, on the other hand, is much more of a lesson in GenX strategy. Bart is a ten-year-old media strategist—or at least an unconscious media manipulator—and his exploits reveal the complexity of the current pop media from the inside out. In one episode, the show that earned Reiss and Jean their first Emmy nomination, Homer sees a commercial for a product he feels will make a great birthday gift for Bart: a microphone that can be used to broadcast to a special radio from many feet away (a parody of a toy called Mr. Microphone). At first Bart is bored with the gift and plays with a labeler he also received instead. Bart has fun renaming things and leaving messages like “property of Bart Simpson” on every object in his home; one such label on a beer in the fridge convinces Homer that the can is off limits. Bart’s joy, clearly, is media and subversive disinformation.

Homer plays with the radio instead, trying to get Bart’s interest, but the boy knows the toy does not really send messages into the mediaspace; it only broadcasts to one little radio. Bart finally takes interest in the toy when he realizes its subversive value. After playing several smaller-scale pranks, he accidentally drops the radio down a well and gets the idea for his master plan. Co-opting a media event out of real history, when a little girl struggled for life at the bottom of a well as rescuers worked to save her and the world listened via radio, Bart uses his toy radio to fool the world and launch his own media virus. He creates a little boy named Timmy O’Toole, who cries for help from the bottom of the well. When police and rescuers prove too fat to get into the well to rescue the boy, a tremendous media event develops. News teams set up camp around the well, much in the fashion they gather around any real-world media event, like the O. J. trial or the Waco stand-off. They conduct interviews with the unseen Timmy—an opportunity Bart exploits to make political progress against his mean school principal. In Timmy’s voice, he tells reporters the story of how he came to fall into the well: he is an orphan, new to the

neighborhood, and was rejected for admission to the local school by the principal because his clothes were too shabby. The next day, front-page stories calling for the principal's dismissal appear. Eventually the virus grows to the point where real-world pop musician Sting and Krusty the Clown, a TV personality from within the world of *The Simpsons*, record an aid song and video to raise money for the Timmy O'Toole cause called "We're Sending Our Love Down the Well." The song hits number one on the charts.

So Bart, by unconsciously exploiting a do-it-yourself media toy to launch viruses, feeds back to mainstream culture. He does this both as a character in Springfield, U.S.A., and as a media icon in our datasphere, satirizing the real Sting's charity recordings. The character Bart gets revenge against his principal and enjoys a terrific prank. The icon Bart conducts a lesson in advanced media activism. But, most importantly, it is through Bart that the writers of *The Simpsons* are enabled to voice their own, more self-conscious comments on the media.

Finally, in the story, Bart remembers that he has put a label on his radio toy, earmarking it "property of Bart Simpson." He decides he better get it out of the well before the radio, and his own identity, is discovered. In his attempt to get the damning evidence out from the bottom of the well, however, Bart really does fall in. He calls for help, admitting what he has done. But once there is a real child in the well—and one who had attempted to play a prank on the media—everyone loses interest in the tragedy. The virus is blown. The Sting song plummets on the charts, and the TV news crews pack up and leave. It is left to Bart's mom and dad to dig him out by hand. In our current self-fed media, according to the writers of *The Simpsons*, a real event can have much less impact than a constructed virus, especially when its intention is revealed.

No matter how activist the show appears, its creators insist that they have no particular agenda. Reiss insisted he promoted no point of view on any issue. In fact, he claimed to have picked the show's subjects and targets almost randomly:

The show eats up so much material that we're constantly just stoking it like a furnace when we parody a lot of movies and TV. And now so many of our writers are themselves the children of TV writers. There's already a second generation rolling in of people who not only watched TV but watched tons of it. And this is our mass culture. Where everyone used to know the catechism, now they all know episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, our common frame of reference.

Reiss was being deceptively casual. Even if he and the other writers claim to have no particular agenda (which is debatable), they readily admit to serving the media machine as a whole. As writers, they see themselves as "feeding" the show and using other media references as the fodder. It is as if the show is a living thing, consuming media culture, recombining it, and spitting it out as second-generation media. With a spin.

Even Bart is in on the gag. In one episode, when Homer is in the hospital, the family stands around his sick bed recalling incidents from the past, leading to a satire of the flashback format used by shows to create a new episode out of "greatest hit" scenes from old ones. As the family reminisces together about past events,

Bart raises a seeming non sequitur. His mother, Marge, asks him, “Why did you bring that up?” “It was an amusing episode,” replies Bart, half looking at the camera, before he quickly adds “. . . of our . . . lives.” Bart knows he’s on a TV show and knows the kinds of tricks his own writers use to fill up airtime.

Such self-consciousness is what allows *The Simpsons* to serve as a lesson in modern media discontinuity. Bart skateboards through each episode, demonstrating the necessary ironic detachment needed to move through increasingly disorienting edits. “It’s animation,” explained Jean, who has since returned to writing for the program. “It’s very segmented, so we just lift things in and out. If you watch an old episode of *I Love Lucy*, you’ll find it laborious because they take so long to set something up. The thesis of *The Simpsons* is nihilism. There’s nothing to believe in anymore once you assume that organized structures and institutions are out to get you.” “Right,” chimed in Reiss, finally admitting to an agenda. “The overarching point is that the media’s stupid and manipulative, TV is a narcotic, and all big institutions are corrupt and evil.” These writers make their points both in the plots of the particular episodes and in the cut-and-paste style of the show. By deconstructing and reframing the images in our media, they allow us to see them more objectively, or at least with more ironic distance. They encourage us to question the ways institutional forces are presented to us through the media and urge us to see the fickle nature of our own responses. Figures from the television world are represented as cartoon characters not just to accentuate certain features, but to allow for total recontextualization of their identities. These are not simple caricatures, but pop cultural samples, juxtaposed in order to illuminate the way they affect us.

As writers and producers, Reiss and Jean served almost as “channels” for the media, as received through their own attitudinal filters. While they experience their function as simply to “stoke the furnace,” the media images they choose to dissemble are the ones they feel need to be exposed and criticized. Reiss admitted to me,

I feel that in this way *The Simpsons* is the ultimate of what you call a media virus. It sounds a little insidious because I have kids of my own, and the reason we’re a hit is because so many kids watch us and make us a huge enterprise. But we’re feeding them a lot of ideas and notions that they didn’t sign on for. That’s not what they’re watching for. We all come from this background of comedy that has never been big and popular—it’s this Letterman school or *Saturday Night Live*, *Harvard Lampoon*, *National Lampoon*. We used to be there, too.

The Simpsons provided its writers with a durable viral shell for their most irreverent memes: “It’s as though we finally found a vehicle for this sensibility, where we can do the kind of humor and the attitudes, yet in a package that more people are willing to embrace. I think if it were a live-action show, it wouldn’t be a hit,” Reiss concluded quite accurately. In the mainstream media, only kids’ TV appears sufficiently innocuous to permit such high levels of irreverence. Like a Trojan horse, *The Simpsons* sneaks into our homes looking like one thing, before releasing something else, far different, into our lives. The audience interested in the

program's subversive doctrine may not be large enough to keep the show in prime time, but the millions of kids who tune in every week to watch Bart's antics are.

Just as the show raises our awareness of media's false promise of a happy ending and our culture's many false commercial idols, it also brings suburban American consciousness to the next level. Land zoning regulations, almost intentionally planned to flatten the perspective and reduce the potential for ironic, urban cynicism to emerge, have now become the canvas for social satire. Abu's Quik-E-Mart, Krusty Burger, the nuclear power plant, and Springfield Elementary all irrevocably change our relationship to the equivalent locales on our own suburban landscapes. They have been recontextualized experientially. They are points of reference for social satire. They are no longer functional façades, but have been transformed into breaks in the veneer: portals through which to deconstruct the rest of suburban experience. The tube that was once used to sell us the suburban utopia is now the lens through which we can demystify its symbols and smash its myths.

If *The Simpsons* fades in popularity in the coming decade it will merely be a testament to the show having accomplished its purpose. Once we fully recognize the way that our media attempts to make us care about things we ought best not care about, from the labels on our sneakers to the ones on our fertilizer, Bart's lesson in media literacy and cultural activism will be complete.