Meghan Daum: TiVo Tyranny -- The Latest in Self-Loathing

Newspapers pile up, e-mails go unanswered -- and TV shows now go unwatched.

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THE FALL TV season officially kicked off Sunday, meaning that televisions with digital recorders can sag under the weight of even more must-see programs that undoubtedly will be recorded but never watched.

Don't get me wrong — we love this technology, so much so that TiVo, the company that pioneered it in 1999, has become a verb. No matter what kind of digital video recording system we have (and by the end of this year there will be an estimated 22.1 million users) we do not record shows, we TiVo them. Moreover, the phrase "watching television" has morphed into "watching TiVo," a semantic shift that might soon eliminate terms such as "boob tube" and "idiot box" from our pop cultural lexicon. And it was already bad enough that no one uses the word "algosphilist" anymore.

TiVo sounds like the name of a pet beagle. That's apt because, like a loyal dog, DVR technology is nothing if not patient. Part personal shopper who knows our tastes better than we do, part complacent spouse who keeps our dinners warm no matter what time we stumble home at night, DVRs offer a convenience we increasingly feel we cannot live without. But like many conveniences of a technological nature — cellphones, BlackBerrys, laser hair removal — it also introduces yet another form of burdensome maintenance into our lives.

In other words, if you already feel guilty about your piles of unread Sunday newspapers and New Yorker magazines, there's a new form of self-loathing: TiVo tyranny. Ever since I got a DVR system, my television has become a source of dread. No longer a symbol of slothful refuge wherein I can while away a few hours watching whatever dreck happens to be on, it is now a taskmaster. My life is not only cluttered with unanswered e-mails, unreturned phone calls and unfinished novels but entire seasons of television shows I feel I should watch but haven't and probably never will.

At this moment, my TiVo-generated roster includes every episode ever aired of "Weeds" and "Big Love," three months of "The Daily Show," five "South Parks" and several documentaries on subjects such as hybrid corn. Meanwhile, the show everyone's been talking about, "The Wire," escaped my notice entirely. It remains unrecorded, and I remain shamefully clueless.

Studies — including some conducted, oddly enough, by TiVo — have shown that DVRs do increase the number of hours people spend watching television. But according to Josh Bernoff, principal analyst at Forrester Research, the real news is that DVRs get affluent people to watch more television.

"Nielsen Media Research will tell you that there's a clear inverse correlation between income and TV watching," Bernoff said. "DVRs cost money and, right now, are for affluent people. So they're watching more than in the past."

I must not be as affluent as I thought. Caught in the shackles of my own personal TiVo tyranny, my DVR has reduced my viewing hours practically to zero. And it's not just because the remote control somehow ended up in my car. It's because turning on the TV is now less about escape than about being confronted with an electronic to-do list.
There are the shows I want to watch, the shows I feel I should watch and shows the DVR thinks I should watch based on my prior selections. Faced with this monstrous inventory, the only logical thing to do is turn off the TV.

That's because with choice comes paralysis and, in turn, convenience usually finds apathy nipping at its heels. In the pre-TiVo era, television was challenging. We had to hunt for something worth watching and, if we found it, we sat still and paid attention. In the same strange way that it's infinitely more satisfying to hear a favorite song come up unexpectedly on the radio than to play it on a CD, there was a certain beauty to the old-fashioned TV experience. Even if we watched alone, we knew millions of others were watching the same exact thing, at the same exact moment. Even if there was nothing on that we particularly wanted to watch, there was something nice about settling on the best thing we could find and shutting off our brains for a while.

Of course, smart people aren't supposed to want to shut off their brains. DVRs, being for smarties (or at least the affluent, which may get you further than being smart) is supposedly about quality rather than quantity. It's supposed to reduce our guilt about what we watch. Instead, we get to feel guilty about what we don't watch.

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FOR THE RECORD:
An earlier version of this column referred to Bernoff's company as Forrest Research. The correct name is Forrester Research. —