

View television with critical eye

By Dan Bloom

Mr. Bloom works at the Northwest Community College in Nome. He grew up in Boston, Mass., and has lived in Alaska for the last six years.

We must look television right in the eye. And if what we see appears to be negative and harmful, we must say so. There are a lot of good things about television and there are also a lot of bad things. And in the Bush areas of Alaska, these pluses and minuses often can be magnified in the collision of two cultures.

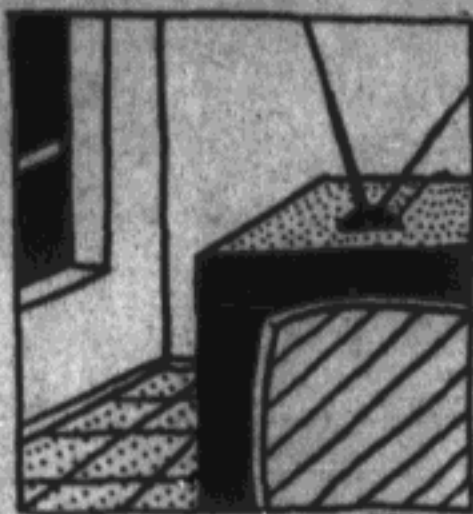
In the Bush there is no city life, and yet television constantly brings images and sounds of city life to residents of rural areas. For what purpose? Entertainment. Instruction. Passing the time. Killing time, in some cases.

I recently spoke with a young woman from Kotzebue. She said that before television came to Kotzebue the young children were never bored. There was always something to do. There were visits between houses, gossip was exchanged, chores were shared, recreation was a natural and functional part of village life.

But then tv came to that part of the world and much changed. "Now everyone stays home and watches television," my friend told me. "There is less visiting, there is less sharing, there is more boozing. The teenagers say they are bored. Television has ripped into our culture and changed it dramatically."

Of course, television can be helpful. It can bring educational messages and programs, and it can give to one culture a sense of what other cultures are like. It can be a bridge between the past and the future and it can link communities one to the other.

But when we look television



right in the eye, we can't help but see the harm it has done. And not only in Bush Alaska, but in the Lower 48 as well. In Third World countries, too. The cultural and economic values that television often carries with its messages, either inadvertently or quite consciously, conflict with many of the values of Bush life and Native traditions.

In Savoonga, young children get up at three in the morning to watch cartoons beamed from some metropolis. In Nome schoolchildren can watch "Nine to Five" nine to five times a week on HBO, the same program repeated over and over like a broken record. Commercials for products manufactured and used by a dog-eat-dog Western world seem like intrusions in a land far north of such barking.

And so the question comes up again and again, and people will be arguing the same question for years to come: what place television, or perhaps more accurately, what price television? Because there is a price to be paid in bringing television to the Bush. Whoever asked for it to be there in the first place? Like alcohol, which is ripe for abuse, television also is a dangerous and possibly destructive instrument of a very innocent (yet potent) form of cultural imperialism.

The price paid for television in the Bush is expensive and

I am talking here of the price in terms of cultural disintegration. Perhaps we need to re-think what we are doing with television in the Bush, if it is not already too late. Perhaps villages should vote on whether or not they want tv in their life, just as they have voted on alcohol prohibition.

Just as a skyscraper does not belong in Shishmaref or Barrow, perhaps it is also true (or close to being true) that television does not belong in the Bush except by invitation and by careful and sensitive programming.

It is difficult to decide these things. I grew up with television and I spent a good part of my childhood evenings and Saturday mornings watching the tube and I learned a lot from it. (One of the things I learned was not to trust in it, but this lesson came slowly with age and reflection.)

If a whole new generation in the Bush grows up now with a television programming that is not sensitive to their own inherited cultures or personal systems of values, then that generation may very well be harmed irreparably by this intoxicating and electrifying medium.

It might be good to turn off our television sets for a year or two and re-think this whole technology.

—Dan Bloom
NWCC