

# Is television numbing northern minds?

by Dr. Ted Mala  
for the Tundra Times

The first time I saw it happen was in 1975.

Then it spread to the villages, and then all over the state after that. And then several years ago, I went to Greenland, and there it was again, but this time, in a whole new, advanced and up-to-date form.

Little by little it has spread all over the North and there seems to be no end to it.

## Television.

What brought it home this week to me was my trip to Prudhoe Bay, where I was surrounded by millions and millions of dollars of the very finest in Arctic living that I have ever experienced: indoor restaurants, gyms, exercise equipment, libraries and high-tech state of the art equipment.

There were lots of people around, but they were nowhere to be seen!

No, the camps were open and there were hundreds of people up there. But after their shifts, they all disappeared.

Where were they? Not in the



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recreation rooms or the gym or in the classrooms. They would surface for meals, yet they would carry their meals off in take-out containers or in paper bags instead of eating them in the dining room.

They were all in their rooms, watching cable TV!

And then I realized that what is

happening in so many villages and towns of the circumpolar world affects all people, not just Native people. It was interesting to hear the comments of some that said the "spirit" of the place was gone — all because of television.

What are the implications that television has brought to the mental health of Northern residents? Does one-way communication breed loners and a society that can forget how to communicate with one another?

What does this mean for their families, and how do they act when they go home? Does this contribute to this phenomenon of many broken relationships with those involved with those who work on the Slope?

What would happen if society pulled the plug on Northern television? Would we go back to reading novels, or worse yet, even have to communicate with our neighbors?

One of the precious jewels of the Native Community is our extended families. The world envies us

because the extended family is still alive and well in Alaska Native communities.

There really are no orphans because someone is there for everyone. Some researchers say there are so many mental health problems in the Lower 48 because people keep to themselves and have no one to turn to when things go wrong.

Have we begun to trade our extended families for the isolation of television? Are we starting, like the rest of society, to take on both the good and bad habits?

I sometimes wonder when I see the whole world starting to dress and speak in the same way.

Why do we have to call lawyers and police everytime we have a problem? Why can't we just work things out between ourselves?

These are hard questions that require hard answers. But if we are serious about taking traditional values with us into our modern lives, we had better start with two-way communication.