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Enduring the blizzard of bad television news

The key to appreciating TV is to stop expecting anything but absurdity

It's true. Oregonians, especially those living in the Willamette Valley, don't deal well with snow.

(We're getting to entertainment.)

I should know. Like many Portlanders with a virtual phobia of frozen water, I was stranded in the West Hills of Oregon's biggest city over the weekend. Somewhere between the inch of ice on my car and the glistening sheen of the roadway, freedom had become a distant memory.

So, with little to occupy my time, I turned to America's favorite standby, the television.

(Entertainment is just around the corner.)

Snow may render most Oregonians paranoid, but it leaves local news reporters giddy. A couple inches of the white stuff is news of a caliber with which hunger, poverty and oppression cannot hope to compete.

Needless to say, when you have a genuine blizzard just a little way into the Columbia Gorge, the media have an orgasmic fit, climbing over one another in an effort to provide the best "on-the-spot" images of snow drifts and trucks without chains.

Nauseating indeed, but also delightfully entertaining.

(I told you it was coming.)

This is not a unique phenomenon. Increasingly, television news has become little more than a series of clever visuals and stories about puppies who walk on one leg. From a journalistic perspective, it's painful, and everyone knows it.

Lawrence Grossman, former president of NBC news, went so far as to ask "why local TV news is so awful" in the November/December issue of Columbia Journalism Review. Grossman found many people to blame for the fact that only 40 percent of the average local broadcast is actual news (according to a survey by the Rocky Mountain Media Watch).

What Grossman ignored is the distinct possibility that we don't

want television news. What the American viewer seems to be seeking is television entertainment. Instead of wishing television would tell us something useful, maybe we just need to read alternative publications and rely upon television only when we're too out of it to care what's on.

You see, viewed from the right perspective, local news is pretty funny stuff. Watching local "journalists" slide around on the street a block from the station to demonstrate how hazardous the roads were proved amusing enough to make me forget I'd lost power halfway through "The X-Files."

Of course there's nothing newsworthy about endless reports on bank robberies, gang shootings and cute animals, but the flashing lights and fuzz can be soothing if you try not to think too hard.

The national media have joined in, providing us with insightful commentary about Sonny Bono and the hazards of incompetent politicians skiing into trees. After all, mountains make for pretty pictures.

All that remains is to get rid of those annoying stories about the national debt and health care and replace them with more "Entertainment Tonight"-style fawning over half-wit celebrities like John Tesh. Why risk rousing your audience from their cathode ray tube-induced stupor — they might change the channel.

Perhaps we could even divert the money that might have been spent on welfare and health care (when the people still knew such programs existed) and investigate a way to cause more blizzards, floods and other TV-friendly natural phenomena. Who needs Industrial Light and Magic when we've got Mother Nature?

If all this sounds a bit alarming, there is another option; you can simply use the nightly news as an excuse to yell angrily at the television and share your personal views on the world with the rapt audience of couch cushions that reside in your living room. That's what I do.

And that's pretty damned entertaining.

Mike Schmierbach is editorial editor for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

OPINION



Mike Schmierbach

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Harry Block wrote a bestseller about his best friends. Now, his best friends are about to become his worst enemies.

Deconstructing Harry

COMING: KISS OR KILL (AUSTRALIA)

11:30 Nightly

Frances O'Connor Matt Day

KISS OR KILL

COMING: BEAN

9:25 Nightly
Sat Mat @ 2:45

Frances O'Connor
Matt Day

KISS OR KILL

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5:00 & 7:15 Nightly Sun Mat @ 2:45

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