Episode Book

EPISODE #5618

When Quitting TV Isn't a Decision

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SYNOPSIS

Eight percent of US households own no television, but most of them still watch — they just left the furniture behind. This episode starts with a listener's accidental four-month break from TV and ends somewhere more surprising: the habit discontinuity hypothesis, a Peterborough field experiment with 800 households, and the uncomfortable finding that life's disruptions open a window for change that quietly closes after about three months. If you've ever drifted into a new routine without deciding to, this one's for you.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Eight percent of American households had no television set in twenty twenty-three. That's up from seven percent the year before, which sounds like a rounding error until you realise it's more than a million homes.



Herman

And that number is about to do a lot of work it can't actually do.



Corn

Right. Here's what Daniel wrote in this week. He and Hannah moved apartments several months ago, did most of it themselves with a toddler underfoot, then spent the summer visiting family in the States, and they're only now finishing the settling-in. The move took forever on both ends. And somewhere between the packing and the unpacking, they never got a TV set up. The last rental had one, but it was the landlord's and it stayed bolted to the wall. They've got a basic Nebula projector and nothing to project onto.



Herman

Which is a very specific kind of limbo.



Corn

It is. And the part he lingers on is that the nightly routine he misses most is just opening Netflix and watching a show before bed. Probably four months now, maybe longer. But here's the turn. Now that he's almost at the point where he could resume it, there's this weird hesitation. And that hesitation is what he actually wants to talk about.



Herman

Two questions, he said. One small, one bigger.



Corn

The small one: how do the people who don't watch TV, who have no entertainment screen in the house at all, how do they manage? He says it always sounded austere and depressing to him, and he says that as somebody who barely watches TV. So what percentage of US households actually opt into that voluntarily? And then the bigger question, the one he calls the philosophical one. We've all heard the ninety-day thing, the twenty-one-day thing, form or break a habit. But we always imagine breaking a habit as deliberate. You identify the thing, you move toward stopping it. What happens when you stop something not because you decided to, but because life just panned out that way? How many people arrive at real changes in their daily habits through happenstance? And do those accidental changes stick better than the ones you graft on through effort?



Herman

That second one is the whole episode.



Corn

It is. So let's start with the smaller question, who actually lives without a TV, and how do they do it?



Herman

Let's set the shape first, because these two questions are not equal. The TV-free question is empirical. It's answerable, mostly, and the answer is more interesting than the headline. The habit question is the meat. That's where Daniel's anecdote stops being a story about his apartment and becomes a documented phenomenon with a name and a field experiment behind it.



Corn

And there's a definitional trap sitting right at the front of the first one.



Herman

There is. When a research body says "TV household," it has traditionally meant "owns at least one television set." That definition stopped tracking actual viewing a long time ago. The Advertising Research Foundation has been lobbying to move the measurement to "TV-accessible households" instead, precisely because owning a set and watching television have come apart.



Corn

So the eight percent number is not eight percent of households that opted out of television.



Herman

Not remotely. And that's the thing to hold onto. Eight percent own no set. But three-quarters of those set-less homes, which is six percent of all US households, still have access to linear TV channels and watch exclusively on devices. An earlier ARF finding had eighty percent of set-less households with broadband and more than half watching on their devices.



Corn

They didn't leave television. They left the furniture.



Herman

The set left the house. The watching didn't.



Corn

So how many are actually opting out?



Herman

That's the honest gap. There is no clean statistic for what percentage of US households voluntarily opt out of television or entertainment screens. The eight percent is the best proxy anyone has, and most of those people are not ideological opt-outs. They watch on phones and laptops. The deliberately screen-free subset is real, it's just not isolated as a number anywhere I could find.



Corn

And the age gradient is where the actual story lives.



Herman

Seventeen percent of eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds have no TV set. Fourteen percent of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds. Two percent of people sixty-five and over. Paul Donato, the ARF's chief research officer, put it plainly: the trend toward TV access exclusively on mobile devices shows no signs of letting up, particularly because younger households drive it.



Corn

Two percent. My grandmother's demographic is hanging onto that set like it's a landline.



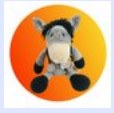
Herman

There's a reason for that, and it isn't nostalgia. For a long stretch the set was the only door into the content. If you didn't own the box, you didn't get the shows. That stopped being true sometime in the last fifteen years, and the ownership numbers are just now catching up to a fact that was already settled.



Corn

So the eight percent is mostly a story about hardware, not about virtue.



Herman

Right. Which makes the second half of Daniel's small question the interesting half. Not how many, but how do the ones who do it manage? And there's a body of first-person writing on this that's remarkably consistent.



Corn

The Business Insider essays.



Herman

Two of them, and they're almost the same story told twice. Jennifer Nied, writing in February, gave away the family TV before a cross-country move. Her words: to travel with fewer boxes. She said it wasn't worth the extra hassle to have another handle-with-care



Herman (continued)

item in the truck. That was five years ago. They still don't have one. Her four-year-old didn't know the word for the object.



Corn

Didn't know the word.



Herman

Didn't know the word "TV." And the household reports spending more time playing games and reading.



Corn

Then there's the other one, which is the more honest essay.



Herman

Jillian Pretzel, in August. And she opens by admitting she used to be the eye-roller. Her line: whenever she heard people proudly say "we don't have a TV," she'd have to fight rolling her eyes. Then she became a mother, and the television went, in her words, from being one of her favourite appliances to her main adversary. So it left the house.



Corn

Except she's not actually screen-free.



Herman

No, and she says so. The kids watch on her laptop. Which is the whole definitional mess in one household. She got rid of the television and kept the television.



Corn

The object left. The behaviour found a new host.



Herman

And that's not a gotcha against her. It's the honest shape of the thing. Marina Krcmar's book Living Without the Screen made the same point back in two thousand nine. She noted the true number of TV-free families is likely somewhat larger than the actual numbers suggest, because so many self-described TV-free people still watch on other devices.



Corn

So the category is soft at both ends. The people counted as TV-free mostly aren't, and some of the people who call themselves TV-free aren't either.



Herman

Soft at both ends, and Daniel is sitting right in the middle of the mush. He has a projector. He has no screen. He's not TV-free by ideology, he's not TV-equipped by setup. He's in the ambiguous middle, which is where most people actually live.



Corn

Now here's the pattern I want to pull on, because it showed up in both essays and it's the bridge to the second question.



Herman

The move.



Corn

The move is the trigger. In both cases the decision wasn't premeditated. Nobody sat down and said, we're going to become a household without television. It emerged out of the logistics of relocating. The box didn't come, or it wasn't worth the hassle, or the set was the landlord's and stayed on the wall.



Herman

Which is Daniel's exact situation. The last place had a TV, but it was attached to the wall and it belonged to somebody else. There was never a moment where he chose to give it up.



Corn

And the older academic work on this population, Barbara Brock's survey of around five hundred TV-free families, more than twelve hundred individual responses, back at the turn of the millennium, that's the classic treatment. But the thing that jumps out reading any of it is the emotional register.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

Daniel says giving up the last dedicated screen sounded austere and depressing to him, and he barely watches TV. Pretzel says she used to roll her eyes at the people who did it. There's a real resistance to the idea before you've tried it, and then, in almost every account, a conversion. The screen isn't just a content delivery device. It's a cue. It's the thing that tells your body the day is over.



Herman

That's the part that isn't about television at all. If the set were purely a way to get shows, then a phone would be a perfect substitute, and for a lot of people it is. But the ritual lives in the object. Opening Netflix before bed isn't just watching something. It's the bookmark at the end of the day.



Corn

Which is why Daniel's hesitation is the interesting bit. He's not hesitating about whether he wants to watch a show. He's hesitating about whether to reinstate a ritual.



Herman

And that's where this stops being a story about televisions and becomes a story about habits. Because everything we've just described, the move as the trigger, the change arriving without a decision, is a named phenomenon.



Corn

Name it.



Herman

The habit discontinuity hypothesis. Verplanken and Wood, two thousand six. The idea is that a habit isn't just a behaviour, it's a behaviour tied to a context. The context supplies the cues. When the context changes, the cues break, and in that gap the behaviour becomes available for reconsideration in a way it normally isn't. They call it a window of opportunity.



Corn

So a move doesn't just disrupt the habit. It temporarily unhooks the behaviour from the automatic system.



Herman

That's the claim. And there's a field experiment that tested it directly. Verplanken and Roy, twenty sixteen, Journal of Environmental Psychology. Eight hundred households in Peterborough in the UK. Half were recent movers, half weren't. Half got a sustainability intervention, half were control. Five hundred and twenty-one completed both waves.



Corn

And the result?



Herman

The intervention was significantly more effective among the recent movers. The interaction between intervention and relocation came in at a beta of minus zero point zero eight, t of minus two point three seven, p under zero point zero two. The effect was strongest for the people who'd moved within the previous three months.



Corn

Three months.



Herman

Approximately three months. After that, no detectable effect. Once you've settled into the new place, the window has closed.



Corn

Daniel's gap is four months.



Herman

Four months, if not longer. Which is the tension I want to sit on, because it cuts against the feeling he describes. He says there's this sense that this was meant to be, that he's made the adaptation, so let's just keep going with it. The intuition is that the change is now locked in. The data says the opposite. The window where the disruption makes change easiest may have already shut.



Corn

So the four months isn't evidence that the new pattern has set. It might be evidence that he's past the point where it was easy.



Herman

And the authors themselves are careful about this. They say that when old habits are temporarily disturbed, people may be more sensitive to new information and adopt a mindset conducive to behaviour change. But they also warn that once a person has settled



Herman (continued)

into the new situation, old habits may easily be reactivated. They flag that the effect size was small and should be treated as proof of concept.



Corn

So the window is real but modest.



Herman

Real, modest, and time-limited. Which is a much more interesting claim than "moves change your life."



Corn

There's a second piece of research I want in here, because it speaks directly to something odd in Daniel's framing.



Herman

The starting versus stopping asymmetry.



Corn

He keeps saying he didn't want to stop this. He thought watching a couple of hours of Netflix a week was a healthy part of relaxing. So this isn't a bad habit he's trying to quit. It's a neutral habit that got removed by circumstance.



Herman

And the literature doesn't have a clean frame for that. McMillan, Milyavskaya and Burns, twenty twenty-three, in Social and Personality Psychology Compass. Four hundred and fifty-two people during the COVID lockdowns. What they found is an asymmetry between starting and stopping. Starting a new behaviour feels more rewarding and is experienced as easier. New behaviours were more autonomously motivating, less driven by controlled motivation, less automatic, less difficult to change. Stopping an unwanted behaviour was rated as more important, but harder and less rewarding.



Corn

Which is backwards from how people talk about it.



Herman

It is. Everyone treats quitting as the hard heroic thing and starting as the easy thing, and the data says starting is the one that feels good while you're doing it. In the same study, seventy-three point two percent of participants had started at least one new behaviour after the disruption, against sixty-three point three percent who wanted to stop an unwanted behaviour. And people had started more new behaviours than they wanted to stop.



Corn

So after a disruption, the default drift is toward addition, not subtraction.



Herman

Toward addition. Which makes Daniel's case strange, because his Netflix habit is neither. It's not a start, it's not a stop. It's a neutral habit removed by circumstance. And the research literature doesn't really cover that third category. That's a real gap, not something I'm papering over.



Corn

Now the other thing sitting in Daniel's prompt is the ninety-day line.



Herman

And that one has an origin story, which is my favourite thing in all of this. The twenty-one-day figure traces back to a plastic surgeon. Maxwell Maltz, nineteen sixty, a book called Psycho-Cybernetics. And the number comes from how long his patients took to adjust to a new face after plastic surgery.



Corn

A surgeon noticing how long it takes to stop being startled by your own reflection.



Herman

And that got generalised into a self-help law about all human behaviour. The actual research is nothing like that tidy. Lally and colleagues in twenty ten found a range of eighteen to two hundred and fifty-four days for a behaviour to become automatic, with a median of sixty-six.



Corn

Eighteen to two hundred and fifty-four is not a range. That's a shrug.



Herman

It's a distribution with a very long tail. Keller and colleagues in twenty twenty-one ran a randomised controlled trial, a hundred and ninety-two adults over eighty-four days, and found a median of fifty-nine days for the people who successfully formed habits to reach peak automaticity. And the University of South Australia put out the first systematic review of its kind in January twenty twenty-five, which concluded new habits can begin forming in about two months but can take longer than you expect.



Corn

So the honest number is somewhere between a couple of months and most of a year, depending on the behaviour and the person.



Herman

And the ninety-day version is a marketing figure. It's not wrong in the sense that habits do take a while. It's wrong in the sense that it's presented as a rule.



Corn

There's one more piece of evidence I want, because it's the closest thing to an answer on Daniel's actual question.



Herman

Whether accidental changes stick better than deliberate ones.



Corn

And the honest answer is nobody has tested that head to head.



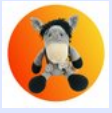
Herman

Nobody has. The habit discontinuity literature shows that a context disruption makes behaviour change more likely and makes interventions more effective inside that window. It does not compare the long-term persistence of accidental change against intentional change. That comparison doesn't exist in the literature I could find.



Corn

So we can say the window is real. We can't say the changes made inside it last longer.



Herman

We can say something adjacent, though. Whittle and colleagues in twenty twenty-four, writing in Frontiers in Psychology about red meat consumption, found that life events partially counteracted entrenched habits, in line with the discontinuity hypothesis. And Walker and colleagues in twenty fifteen, studying an office relocation, found that travel habit weakened immediately after the move, and that in the people who changed how they commuted, the habit strength for the old mode didn't disappear abruptly.



Corn

It weakened. It didn't vanish.



Herman

It weakened. Which is the right way to think about Daniel's four months. The old habit didn't get deleted. It got suspended. And the question is whether it comes back when the projector finally finds a screen.



Corn

That's the thing about a suspended habit. It's not gone. It's just waiting for its cue.



Herman

And the cue is still in the house, in a box.



Corn

That's the part that gets me. The projector is sitting there. It's not that the capability is gone. It's that the ritual has no anchor.



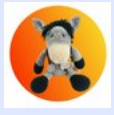
Herman

The last place had an anchor. It was a television bolted to a wall that belonged to somebody else. Daniel never had to decide anything about it. It was just there, and so the routine was just there.



Corn

And now the anchor is gone, and the routine went with it.



Herman

Which raises the question the research can't answer. If the window closed at three months, and he's at four, is the change now locked in, or is he about to reactivate an old habit the moment there's something to project onto?



Corn

I don't think anyone knows. I think he's about to find out.



Herman

There's a detail from the essays that keeps nagging at me, though. Pretzel didn't get rid of television. She got rid of the set. The kids watch on her laptop. So the behaviour survived the object.



Corn

Which means the object wasn't the habit. The object was the cue.



Herman

And cues are substitutable. That's the uncomfortable part. If the cue is "a screen in the evening," the laptop does the job. If the cue is "the specific ritual of opening Netflix on the big screen before bed," the laptop doesn't.



Corn

The question for Daniel isn't whether he can watch Netflix again. It's whether the ritual he misses was about the content or about the shape of the evening.



Herman

He can't know that until the projector has a screen and he tries it.



Corn

There's a version of this where he sets it up, watches two episodes, and wonders why he bothered.



Herman

A version where it slots straight back in like it never left.



Corn

A third version, which is the one the research actually predicts, where he sets it up and the old pattern reactivates so smoothly that he never notices it was ever gone.



Herman

The habit discontinuity literature would say that's the risk. Once you've settled into the new situation, the old habit reactivates easily. The four months of not watching might turn out to have been a pause, not a change.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to hear about four months. Four months feels like a long time.



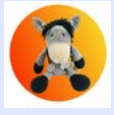
Herman

Four months is a long time for a person and a short time for a habit.



Corn

That's the sentence I'm going to be thinking about all week.



Herman

The other thing worth saying is that the eight percent number is going to keep getting murkier, not clearer. The ARF is already arguing that set ownership is the wrong measurement, and they're right. As more households watch on phones and laptops, "TV-free household" is going to describe fewer and fewer people who are actually free of television.



Corn

The statistic that sounds like it's about opting out is mostly about hardware.



Herman

Mostly about hardware. And the screen-free households, the ones who've made a decision, are a small fraction of that eight percent, and nobody has isolated them as a number.



Corn

Which is its own small finding. The most interesting population in the question is the one nobody's counted.



Hilbert

The ones who had it on a stand never put it back up.



Corn

Sorry, go on.



Hilbert

I did furniture delivery and setup for a few years. Part of the job was mounting televisions in people's new places. You'd go in, you'd have the bracket, you'd have the studs, you'd have it on the wall in an hour.



Corn

What did you notice?



Hilbert

The ones who had it mounted in the old place, they had it mounted again inside the first week. Every time. The bracket was already in the truck. The wall was going to get a hole in it whether they liked it or not. It wasn't a decision, it was just where the thing goes.



Herman

The ones who had it on a stand?



Hilbert

The ones on a stand, they'd moved it themselves. Wrapped it in a blanket, put it in the car, carried it up the stairs. And a lot of them went weeks without setting it up. Some of them months. I did a job for a couple, nice people, they had a big television on a stand in the old apartment. They moved it themselves. I came back four months later to mount a mirror for them, and the television was still in its box in the corner of the living room. They'd gotten used to not having it.



Corn

Still in the box.



Hilbert

They said they'd get to it. They never did, as far as I know.



Herman

The physical form of the object predicts whether it comes back.



Hilbert

It's not willpower. It's whether the thing has a place to go back to. The mounted one has a place. The one on the stand has to be chosen, and choosing takes a minute, and nobody ever has the minute.



Corn

Daniel's last place had it on the wall. The landlord's.



Hilbert

Then it was never his to move, and it was never his to decide about either. It just stayed where it was. And now he's got a projector with no wall.



Herman

There's nothing to reattach.



Hilbert

That's the whole thing.



Corn

The television in the box in the corner.



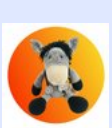
Hilbert

Four months later. They'd gotten used to it.



Corn

I've got a level to check before we go on, the second mic's been drifting a bit on the left channel. Give me a second.



Herman

The research gap is real. Nobody has directly compared whether accidental habit changes persist longer than deliberate ones. We can say the window is about three months, and Daniel's at four, and that means he's either past the point of easy change or right at the



Herman (continued)

edge of a reactivation.



Corn

The image that stays with me is Hilbert's. The television still in its box in the corner, months later, because nobody ever got around to choosing it. That's the phenomenon in physical form. Not a decision. A box that never got opened.



Herman

The eight percent is going to keep getting murkier. Set ownership is already the wrong measurement, and the ARF knows it. As more people watch on phones, "TV-free household" will describe fewer and fewer people who are actually free of television.



Corn

The window is a real constraint. Three months for a disruption to open a door. After that it's just the new normal, and the old habit is sitting there waiting for its cue.



Herman

Daniel still hasn't set up the projector.



Corn

The question is whether he will, or whether the box just stays in the corner.



Herman

That's the episode. If you're enjoying the show, a review wherever you're listening helps other people find it. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.