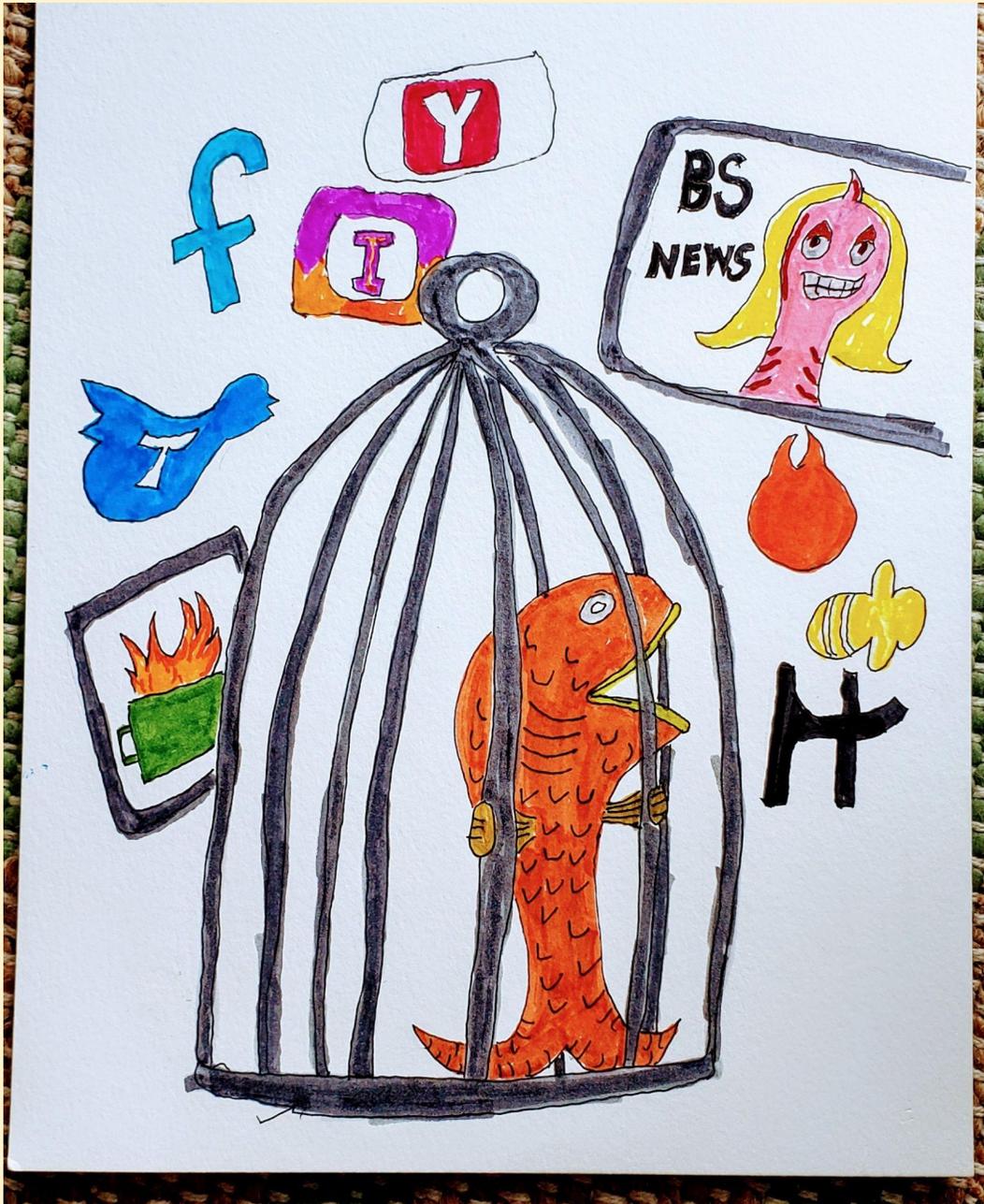# Calhoun's Electronic Cage

by Rocky Shores

Brain tissue [might be specialized fat](#), but I think about it like a bunch of muscles. Pretend for a second that the frontal lobes and executive function--the highly evolved stuffs--are like any other voluntary system. They're self-directed lots of the time, but can be hijacked by the fishbrain's limbics and involuntary systems at any second. The higher functions get almost no input when this happens, and usually have no awareness of it either.

When the Inner Fish takes control reflexes happen before the conscious mind knows it's happening. A hand pulls away from a hot stove, a person jumps at a loud noise--actions that dodge injury or death. The reflexes are as reliable as a [child's toy that spins an arrow](#) and plays a recording when a lever is pulled.

When the Inner Fish captures the Forebrain it has the same effect. A feeling arises, the Inner Fish punches a synapse, and a recording plays through the Forebrain in the form of a thought--just like when a child pulls a lever and the machine plays "The cow says 'Moo'". The share of thoughts that are truly voluntary could be terrifyingly small.

This implies the Forebrain is primarily a survival tool for the Inner Fish. Intrusive thoughts, habitual deflections, judgements of the self and others--these persist because yesterday's conscious thoughts didn't get the body killed. There's no other reason. The Inner Fish swats at those synapses, like a toddler pulling on a lever, regardless of the emotional toll on the thinking-feeling-existing creature.

It's not until the logic and habits are so obsolete they bring the creature to the brink of destruction that the Inner Fish forces change. But it's limbic. The new thoughts are just as anxious and cruel, fearful and angry, as the shit they replace.

David Foster Wallace, [when writing about television in 1990](#), used the term "malignant addiction" to describe a self-soothing behavior that recreates the very problem it relieves. Alcohol, for example, alleviates boredom and emotional pain, but in the long term it leaves the drinker more prone to both. The readiest solution is to drink more frequently. Many do this until the psychological, physiological, and financial consequences become too great to bear.

Television doesn't kill as quickly as alcoholism, but it's every bit as malignant. It creates an environment of [self-judgment](#) and [inactivity](#), and then sells "[cures](#)" for the consequences to the very audience it has ensnared.

A good television series fills the viewer's emotional need for relationships, status, and personal growth. Well-written, plausible characters pursue adventures in the real world--discovery, confrontation, dangerous games and dangerous sex--and through the these experiences become better and more successful. A chronic viewer, on the other hand, becomes less active in the real world. They turn to the next

program to alleviate the pain caused by [existential injury](#) and [loss of physical strength](#).

The ideal approach would be to have one or two shows one occasionally enjoys, and use them to find insight to fight one's own battles in the real world. That requires habits of deliberate thought and adventure-seeking--to think, meditate, and act remorselessly--and embrace the consequences. But to pick up the remote is trivial, and Netflix and Hulu and Disney+ automatically play the next title without so much as a commercial break. The viewer dies softly.

It's been said that an American who's 10 years old and in good health can reasonably expect to [live to a hundred](#). The [average retiree watches 4.5 hours](#) of television a day. That's a lot of decades spent primarily watching TV.

I remember meeting an older Italian man when I was 17. I'd studied French for four years in high school, and it turned out the two of us spoke it at the same level. He told me about his delicate constitution and how he had to retire at 62. His morning routine was to walk to a bakery for fresh bread and coffee. Then he'd go out on the beach and spend the day making pencil sketches. He opened his sketchbook for me. It was full of drawings of nubile females whose clothing ranged from sundresses to nothing.

To my 17 year old mind it looked depressing. When he should have been running marathons, climbing mountains, seducing foreign hotties, racing dune buggies in Baja--instead he was waist-deep in boredom, and balls-deep in his own hands. Now I mock my naivete.

Consider the plight of the average retired American man. Eating processed junk food and swilling cheap beer while switching between Fox News, ESPN, and AMC, day after miserable day. This mild Italian--the highlight of his day was watching tanned women of every nationality cavort across the sand. While the likely highlight of mine would be Tucker Carlson's evening screed. The Italian's day started with espresso, strong and fresh, and a hunk of warm bread. It ended with merlot and pasta on the balcony. While I face the existential dread of a fate worse than death. Cheap coffee, shifting my gut around the couch, reruns, facebook rants, and pining for yesteryear. Days that end with a feeble attempt to coax my wrinkled, eternally-limp cock into something resembling an orgasm. Imagine this, if you dare, and you will have imagined the life of the average retired American male. No wonder that group's [suicide rate is wildly out of control](#). Lingering when the party's over is so 2021.

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Television is madly destructive to the humanity of humans, but not because it entertains, or even because it entertains addictively.

I once read a blog post called "[All My Friends are Millionaires](#)". The writer was enduring a period of low-paid temp-job employment. He was broke. What little time off he had was spent watching television, listening to the opinions of highly-compensated people. He mocked the

false kinship created through these one-way conversations. If viewers experienced these relationships in meatspace they'd recognize them as destructive.

Wallace noted that television programs and ads are full of pretty people because, at a base level, images of beauty stimulate reward endorphins in the viewer's brains. It's cheap dopamine and serotonin for the viewer. Ratings-driven broadcasters and streaming services don't give a rat's ass about the biological reason. They simply pursue higher viewership and revenue by repeating the things that work.

In the 2000s I got by for a couple years waiting tables. I decided beforehand to always project an image of being above the job I was in, mainly because I hoped to use the opportunity to network my way into a better job. I showed up in a clean, wrinkle free uniform and acted like I had better options than to be there, even when I didn't. At the same time I tried to give the best service I could. In a job that mostly depended on tips, I made bank.

I couldn't be at the top of my game everyday. Some days I wasn't able to nail down my appearance, and some days I didn't perform all that well. I found that days when I looked good, but wasn't on my game I earned much higher tips than when I didn't look my best but otherwise performed well. I learned that the vast majority of people, when given a choice, will choose to be treated poorly by someone they think is better than them over being treated well by someone they consider to be below them.

By projecting images of beauty and success, TV companies lead their viewers to believe the people on the screen are somehow above them in the social hierarchy. When the projection is constant, it can erode the viewer's self-image and self-esteem. Later, the viewer stands in front of a bathroom mirror or selfie camera and sees an image that's not as pretty as the one on the television screen. That the TV image is mostly farce is lost on the Inner Fish. It pulls a synaptic lever and the person looking in the mirror realizes: "This is why Suzie rejected me in the 10th grade. Because I don't look like the hot Captain on Chicago Fire."

It's pretty well known that treating a date too well is a great way to not get laid. The phrase "You gotta be mean to keep 'em keen" wasn't invented for no reason at all. There's all kinds of speculation about why this is, but I'm partial to the self-esteem hypothesis. When you treat your object of desire like a beautiful, valuable, unique human being, it raises their self-esteem. Rather than look across the table at the person who gave them a gift of higher self-esteem and think "This is a rare gem to be kept in my life", they look across it and think "They're sweet, but I can do better". But when the same person is treated poorly, their self-evaluation becomes "I must be garbage. There's no way I can do better than this."

As a result, many, many people wind up spending their lives attached to one demeaning partner after another. Their eroded self-esteem keeps them from believing they could thrive without the very person who's eroding it. The television sitting on an entertainment center or hanging from a wall is an example of such a partner. And like an abusive partner,

the television uses the ego-weakening it inflicts to extract from the subservient partner.

Subscription fees. Infomercials. Commercials. Pleas for donations of every kind. Television afflicts viewers with problems, or just convinces them they have problems, and then sells solutions to the very problems it creates. It's the definition of an abusive relationship.

And that's the situation just with broadcast and streamed television. Add in laptops, tablets, and a cellphone or two for every adult. The bulk of activity on these gadgets is ostensibly to facilitate "human connection", through social media, messaging, email, and dating apps. One would think--with all this stuff to facilitate connection and relationships--first-worlders would feel more fulfilled than ever. More connected than ever. Happier than ever. [But you'd be wrong]. Time has proved that in every way television is bad, social media is worse.

Go on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, or any popular social media platform and it doesn't take long to find gobs of users pouring their aches into the internet's ether. "[I'm so unbearably lonely]." "Nobody wants me for more than a night." "My spouse is an addict." "My parents abuse me." The pain is raw and palpable, and so is its persistence. Unfailingly, especially if the poster is a baddie with a six-pack or a pair of perky knockers, the post is flooded with likes, shares, words of encouragement and commiseration, and sometimes bullying and hate.

I've noticed that the tracks repeat often, sometimes for years. It may eventually go on for decades for a lot of them, but I doubt I can hang in long enough to find out for sure. It's an insidious dynamic. The television, like a neighborhood bully, carves abomination into its victim's countenance. Then it goes away for a while. The victim is left to contemplate the pain in private, or at least move to the next insult without wallowing in the first one. Healing is possible. But wounds borne open on social media seem to persist indefinitely.

The problem isn't so much the gift of support or the [endorphin boost] the poster gets from it. Those at least temporarily alleviate emotional pain. The problem is that they produce rewards for painful or demeaning thoughts. In other words, a kind of [self-induced brainwashing]. Rather than fuelling one's escape from a painful or dangerous situation, [it can entrap them].

Deep emotional pain triggers feelings of threat to the Inner Fish. It pulls a synaptic lever. The forebrain produces a repeated thought--a story about the pain--that's usually false and often self-destructive. Through a network of fingers, screens, and electronic signals, the thought is validated, rewarded, and reinforced. Cognitively speaking, the sufferer ends the scenario in a worse position than before. There's an abundance of data showing social media use is correlated with feelings of loneliness, [anger], [inadequacy], [FOMO], [hatred of the self] and the [world at large].

Social media execs argue, just like tobacco execs did before them, that the problem isn't use, it's improper use. They propose the same solution--for the [very people being harmed to use the platforms even more](). Cruelty in its purest form. Stupid and Evil. That may not be what these folks inherently are, but it's the course they're following.

A couple years ago a friend gave me her thoughts on the Kardashians. She had nothing against them for wanting to look inhumanly pretty and thought it was great that they'd made mad fortunes doing it. However, she felt it created an expectation among straight men that women look like that through the course of their lives. At the time I thought that using makeup and cosmetic surgery to prolong a career of vapidity was nothing new. In the 2000s it was rumored that Angelina Jolie insisted that every frame that showed her skin was to be airbrushed to be free of blemishes. Fifteen years later, the ubiquity of filtered photos is democratization of that privilege.

On further consideration, she wasn't wrong. At the peak of her stardom, Angelina Jolie was an icon of unattainable beauty. A woman could simply never achieve her appearance, so no man could attract it. Now highly filtered , curated photos have spread across social media and dating apps to the point that they look like the norm.

The effect on the Inner Fish is to convince it that these beauty standards not only exist, but are easy to find. It doesn't work on only one side of the gender equation. According to data from Hinge, [4% of male users receive 50% of the likes given to all male users](). On the other end, half of male users receive one like or less over their entire duration of use. Physical appearance has become more important for a male wishing to attract a mate of the opposite gender than it is for an equivalent female. Like many stories, the truth is the opposite of what's told.

A surprising corollary of all this is the [rise of disinterest in the opposite gender]() among women and men throughout the developed world. Marriage rates [began to fall in the 1960s](), but were replaced with cohabitation and domestic partnerships. Those are also now in decline. While some decline is expected in any aging population, but the decline is most pronounced among reproductive-age adults. At the same time we've seen a rise to prominence of "confirmed bachelors", "incels", "herbivore men", "independent women", "voluntary celebates", "MGTOWs", and "WGTOWs". Disinterest in the opposite gender has not only become common, but a point of pride and personal identity. Americans have gone from [bowling alone]() to [living alone](), too.

At the [National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)]() in the 1960s, [John B Calhoun]() created a vast [mouse utopia](). Its residents were given unlimited food and water, protected from the elements, shielded from disease, and cleaned up after. Within a year, the mouse population grew to a point where dominant males could no longer maintain their territories.

It turns out mice are typically mammalian in their [mating instincts](#). As with [red deer](#), [lions](#), orangutans, etc, the average female finds the average male undesirable as a mate. As a result, males fight with other males for territory, and whichever wins those fights goes on to mate with nearly all the females in his domain. Males who lose become submissive and leave the territory--they live to fight another day. Males who win must maintain control through physical dominance and conflict. The species benefits in two ways. First, because healthier and more cunning males pass their genes forward. Second, because dominant males create stable environments where females can raise their young.

When Calhoun's mouse population reached a point where males who lost had nowhere to go, the rest of the mice were forced to tolerate their presence. Dominant males spent more time and energy keeping the other males in their territories submissive, and less time maintaining order between females. As submissive males took up more space, females had smaller areas within which to care for young. As a result, they spent increasing amounts of time fighting with other females and submissive males for territory.

In the overpopulated environment, females lost the ability to nurture young. Some new litters were abandoned at birth, while others were abandoned before reaching maturity. Males who experienced abandonment became adults who didn't fight for territory or pursue mating opportunities. [They segregated themselves](#) in small areas with groups of celebate females. In those "territories", they carried out nesting, grooming, feeding, and sleeping--behaviors that would normally lead to breeding. These mice grew up to be prime, healthy specimens of mice, so good that Calhoun dubbed them "the beautiful ones". For all their beauty, they never bred.

In the final phase of the experiment, small groups of mice were relocated to empty cages, but [their behavior didn't change.](#) Breeding never restarted, and the population eventually dropped to zero.

Calhoun's mice never experienced true hunger. Their lives were never threatened by bad weather. Their living space was clean and safe from outside threats. Yet when those in the final generation looked around the cage, they saw a world full of dysfunction--children left to starve, endless fights for territory, intense crowding, uncertainty, and anxiety. They also saw beautiful, healthy companions and potential mates. I wonder if the repulsion of seeing dysfunction just overwhelmed the urge to mate. I also wonder if they all just kept rejecting one after another, convinced there was a better one out there.

Looking at a screen has a more drastic effect on the Inner Fish than looking out an equivalent window. Screens bring stories of senseless violence, poverty, abuse of power, and greed directly into the viewer's face. The viewer sees photos and reads descriptions of domestic abuse and child trafficking happening only a few dozen miles away. At the same time, the very screen that depicts these things also floods the viewer with images of beauty and sex appeal beyond what's humanly possible.

The world is statistically safer and more prosperous than it was 40 years ago, but few people in developed nations believe it to be. The average person effectively has fewer potential mates available than their equivalents did 30 years ago, but television and cell phone screens give the impression that there are literally thousands of options. The inner fish is stimulated in a way that circumvents the forebrain--enormous increases in perceived danger and social dysfunction, combined with more and better potential mates. Are we living in the electronic equivalent of Calhoun's original cage?

If so, it would match up with trends we see in developed countries. After peaking in the 1960s at around 70%, the percentage of adults who are married has declined to just over 50%. Birth rates in the US, Canada, and Europe have been below replacement level for 30 of the last 40 years. Throughout Europe, governments have been increasingly sending payments to new mothers for several years following childbirth. The Danish government is running ads to convince Danish men to make more effort to copulate with Danish women. The results are dubious at best.

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"Nobody Cares."
"Nothing matters."
"Men are trash."
"You can love women or you can understand them."
"I'm not loveable."
"Everything would be better if I was dead."

Nietzsche remarked that people don't believe what's true, they believe what's useful. He was half right. Beliefs repeated thoughts that create internal stories. Through those stories, external events and personal feelings are understood. Beliefs chosen by the Inner Fish aren't selected for usefulness or truth. They're selected by billion-year old instincts, most of them vestigial and easily manipulated. Many beliefs are neither true nor useful. The opposite, in fact.

It would be great if philosophy, thoughtfulness, and mental healthcare were as ubiquitous as TVs and Smartphones. It would be helpful to regulate electronic media to account for truthfulness and the mental health of the consumer. Humanity is, unfortunately, a long way from that. As Jaron Lanier points out, every person who chooses independent thought over electronic brainwashing makes the world a little better. Solutions are a long way off, but we must begin by applying our Forebrains to a problem the Inner Fish is not adapted to solve. The only way I can think to end is with a quote from Marcus Aurelius:

> *"Remember that all is opinion. For what was said by the Cynic Monimus is manifest: and **manifest too is the use of what was said, if a man receives what may be got out of it as far as it is true.**"*