

VCR owners' revenge convenient, now legal

The Supreme Court recently decided that I am not a criminal after all. This came as an enormous relief to me and to the nine million other owners of video-cassette recorders who had been accused of breaking the copyright law in our living room.

During an eight-year suit by American moviemakers against the Sony corporation, VCRs had acquired a reputation as part of the video demi-



Ellen Goodman

monde. Jack Valenti, the colorful head of the Motion Picture Association of America, once compared VCRs to "millions of little tapeworms" eating away at the American movie industry.

The notion behind the suit was that the mere existence of a home recorder enticed law-abiding citizens into pushing bad buttons. We would tape a movie on television and "library" it away for endless replays. This would cut into — or should I say choke — the movie resale and rerun business.

I was always touched by the ego behind this argument. The idea that we would want \$8 video-cassettes of *Gidget* for our re-viewing pleasure was a bit bizarre. How many movies can you bear to see twice? Okay, besides *Casablanca*?

But now that we are off the hook, or the docket, and no longer need fear the video cops, I think it is time for nine million of us to confess the real motive for our almost-crime: Revenge. The VCR is the only weapon for the citizens' revenge against television.

Think about it for a minute. What is it that you hate the most about television? I'm not talking about a dreadful program. We've always had a weapon against that: the off button. What is it that you hate about television you want to watch?

My own pet peeve is that the tube is fundamentally anti-social. It's bossy. It waits for no one. We have to be there when the program is there, or we'll miss it like a one-time bus.

How many family conversations have been cut short by the urgency of "I'll miss my program"? How many telephone calls have to be returned "when it's over"? How many dinner hours are planned around the news, how many kids are tucked in during commercials, how many parents compete for attention with the video-dictator?

Justice Stevens wrote that the average family uses the VCR for time-shifting, to watch a program at a more convenient hour. True, but I have a theory that time-shifting is really con-

trol-shifting. A program on tape is like a book. We can pick it up and put it down. We can stop the show, move the wash into the dryer, settle a fight and start again. We beat the tube.

But the sweetest piece of revenge comes from the word that didn't make it into the Supreme Court brief: zapping. Zapping is what we in the shadowy world of VCR owners do to commercials. We push the fast-forward button right through the buggers.

Some of my moments of greatest personal pleasure in the six months since we adopted a VCR have been spent zapping hemorrhoid commercials on the network news. I now zap all the commercials. I zap to the memory of white tornados past. I zap headaches, arthritis, bad breath and laundry detergent. I zap diet-drink maidens and hand-lotion mavens. Decades of despising commercials now motivate the hand that zaps for fun. If it ever becomes illegal, they will find zap-tracks on my forefinger.

I am far from alone in this thrill-seeking adventure. One study shows that a full 86 percent of the VCR owners fast-forward past the commercials. The Supreme Court may have ruled us innocent, but we zap the entire economic basis of the television industry.

Any day now, I am sure the entertainment moguls will be in the halls of Congress trying to get them to rework the copyright laws and put a royalty fee on videotapes. But they are wildly beside the point.

With apologies to Jack Valenti, the problem isn't that a library of tapes could strangle the movie industry. It's that wiping out commercials could entirely and joyfully upend the TV industry. Take the word of The Boston Zapper.

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Correction

The Daily Nebraskan incorrectly reported in the Eric Peterson column of Jan. 26 that UNO faculty members received a 6.6 percent pay increase for the current fiscal year.

The pay hike, which was ordered by the Commission of Industrial Relations, was retroactive for the 1982-83 fiscal year. Technically, UNL faculty members received a 5 percent increase for 1982-83, but it was partially deferred so that the actual raise amounted to approximately 2.5 percent.

The Daily Nebraskan regrets the error.

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