So many quality shows on TV — and so little time

Can a time-management specialist help with the problem of too many good books, movies and shows?

Christopher Borrelli

Not to mention books and movies. What's a person to do? Christopher Borrelli seeks help.

The first step in addressing a problem is recognizing there is a problem, and because I recognized I had a problem I went to see Sue Becker. I drove out to her home in Downers Grove and she met me at the front door. She was polite and formal and practical-seeming; she wore a cranberry-color, wrinkle-free blouse and an expression of placidity and ease more commonly associated with saints and friendly robots. I sat across from her on a couch in her living room — she sat in a cream-colored chair and pulled out a notebook. So, she said, what is your goal in coming here? I told her that a specific goal was hard to pinpoint, but obligations were piling up, and one of my wishes was to lead a less-complicated life. I said I wanted more free time and that I should be seeing friends more. But the immediate problem is that my TiVo holds only 20 hours of programming. And worse, a PBS special on August Wilson and three

hours of HBO's "Mildred Pierce" were chewing up any DVR memory available for new shows. Perhaps one goal is to streamline my choices? Or perhaps ... take it one day at a time? The thing is, every time I catch up on a show, two interesting new ones arrive. Setting old shows aside for later is just an act of denial. She nodded. I took a breath and continued: Also, I would like to read more, but there are too many new books to read and too many old books I still have to read. I would like to go to more concerts, but I don't even have time to listen to the music that piled up on my computer in 2014. And film is no respite anymore: In the past we could see James Bond movies out of order or skip one and not feel as though we missed anything, but the trailer for "Spectre," the next Bond movie, coming this fall, alludes to some dire calamity in "Skyfall," the previous Bond movie, and to be honest, most of what I remember from "Skyfall" was an Adele song. Will I have to see "Skyfall" again? And here's something I never imagined: It is impossible to understand the subtleties and subtexts of the vehicular-stunt epic "Furious 7" without familiarizing yourself with "Fast & Furious 6." I stopped. Becker shook her head in pity. She has been a time-management consultant for 15 years; she conducts seminars for companies such as Leo Burnett on email overload and learning to focus better. She is nothing if not pragmatic. She smiled and offered a little context: "Some people would say they wish they were you." She is right.

As problems go, "too many leisure options" is somewhere between a long line at Starbucks and remembering online passwords. But on a noise-filtering, everyday 21st-century level, it's a cultural hurricane: There are simply not enough hours in a day to keep up with a fraction of what filmmakers, authors, musicians, TV producers and video game designers have churned out in the past 12 months alone.

In the late 1950s, renowned sociologist David Riesman headed the University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Leisure and made the now-remarkable assertion that "the most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure." The center (now defunct) was so concerned of the possibility of a United States rendered shiftless and soft from an excess of newly found free time that it never considered the possibility of an exhausted, overworked population paralyzed by excess choice.

Likewise, Newton Minow, Chicagoan and former FCC chairman, could not have imagined his infamous "vast wasteland" of TV would become so rich in programming that audiences would have to think in terms of first-string and second-string must-sees.

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Indeed, this might have sounded to Minow like science fiction: A couple of weeks ago, I came home from a short trip and fell onto my couch. It was a Sunday night and I was in the mood to

watch TV for a couple of hours. My TiVo showed two red lights on its front panel, which meant it was taping two things at once: the first part of HBO's four-hour documentary about Frank Sinatra and the PBS series "Wolf Hall." Which meant, to my horror, it couldn't also tape the underrated Fox comedy "The Last Man on Earth" and the return of "Mad Men." A week later, Sunday night was even busier, and my TiVo strained under the weight of both "Mad Men" and "Wolf Hall," then the season returns of "Veep" and "Silicon Valley" on HBO. Which meant missing the season premiere of "Game of Thrones." Which meant I would have to remember to catch up, eventually.

I told Becker that I dream of house arrest or breaking a leg — you know, to force the TV time.

"You're looking for permission," she said. "How about giving yourself permission to enjoy what's there?" I shrugged. She asked for my media diet. I explained I had about a dozen first-string shows ("Mad Men," "Louie," "The Americans," etc.) I watch in real time or on TiVo soon after the episode first airs. Then there are about two dozen more shows that I am forever playing catch-up with ("House of Cards," "The Good Wife," etc.). Then the local shows ("Chicago Tonight," "Windy City Live") that my TiVo gathers up in its net and I try to watch a bit of daily. Then the talk shows (Larry Wilmore, Letterman, etc.) that I fastforward through 24 hours later. And then the shows that my TiVo catches and I watch for a scene or two and generally erase ("The Comedians," "The Walking Dead"). Also, I see about seven movies a month (in a theater), listen to podcasts and the radio as I go to sleep, see a concert maybe once every six weeks, buy five or six records a month, attend live theater once a month and play video games three or four times a week. And reading: I read about two books a week. Specifically, I read two new books (published in the past few months) for every old book (published at least 10 years ago).

And none of that includes time spent on social media, skipping around the Internet or skimming magazines. She asked what could go. I said that was tough to say, because even if you eliminate the guilt you feel for not being part of a cultural conversation, so much pop culture these days sets a premium on continuity: If you don't see "Marvel's Avengers: Age of Ultron" next month, forget about understanding "Captain America: Civil War" next year — a simple night at the movies or hour of television has become a cultural contractual obligation. The superhero stuff is the most insistent. I was a fan of the unpretentious, soapy fun of CW's "Arrow," but now it has crossover episodes with the CW series "The Flash," both of which will be spun into a third series this fall. There goes three hours of my week. Also, you could appreciate "Better Call Saul" on its own terms, but the depth of Bob Odenkirk's oddly warm creep can really only be understood by sitting through "Breaking Bad" in its entirety.

Becker said: "It feels like you are adding, not subtracting now. And you forget that this adding comes at a cost. I think you need to be thinking of the four D's. They are delete: How costly is the guilt of getting rid of something from your queue of obligations? They are diminish: Fast-forward on TiVo should help, right? There is delay: Most of this stuff will be out there if you don't get to it now. And lastly, there's delegate: Do you really have to watch 'iZombie' at all? I mean, would you be satisfied by just reading a review of 'iZombie'?"

A good point, but I like "iZombie," and delay is a fool's game. The most absorbing TV series — or film franchises, or literary trilogies — are not so different from coffee punch cards, said Ayelet Fishbach, professor of behavioral science and marketing at U. of C.'s Booth School of Business. A goal is established, and the more often you visit, the more progress you see made. Which sounds not so dissimilar from the Netflix interface, with its helpful gauges of how much progress you have made with individual episodes, seasons or entire series.

Perhaps it's no wonder that since the premiere of "The Sopranos" in 1999, the number of original scripted series

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on cable has jumped from less than two dozen to almost 200: We're suckers for continuity. "But actually we find people give themselves more options and variety than they desire," Fishbach said. So I told her about my reading habits, and she said:

"The problem with your plan is in assuming you want to read an old book after two new books, and maybe you just want to read another new book — maybe you are giving yourself more options here than you need?" Sound advice. Thomas Cooper, a professor of visual and media arts at Emerson College in Boston (and author of "Fast Media, Media Fast: How to Clear Your Mind and Invigorate Your Life in an Age of Media Overload"), has studied media diets for 30 years. Almost a decade ago he spearheaded a "superstudy" on public opinion of media — drawing together scores of major polls conducted since 1987 — and just behind the most frequently cited con- cern (truthfulness) were fears of excess, including excess programming. Or, to use the term architect Richard Wurman, a founder of the TED conferences, coined for this fear in the late 1980s: information anxiety.

And so, to remove that feeling of being burdened and overwhelmed with options, we are now bombarded with recommending functions: Since you watched X, you might like Y. Which, ironically, sneakily, offers only more choice. It never suggests taking a breath after three seasons of "Justified."

James Webster, an expert on media audiences at Northwestern University's School of Communication, remembered: "I once had a student say everything he saw on Netflix came from those recommendations filters, which is so distressing."

Because, by design, it is also so endless.

There is now an infinite amount of stuff — or, if you prefer, "content" — available to a finite spectrum of human existence. As Becker explained it to me: "There is only so much room in a closet, and the only option is to keep cramming more in or weed out what brings you the least pleasure. Our day is also like a closet. A fixed size. You are carrying guilt for not fitting more in your closet. I want you to ruthlessly weed." This was the part I dreaded. I brought up the two-screen solution, that perhaps by doing two things at once — a not-so-unusual goal these days — I would maximize my efficiency, shortening my laundry list of waiting media.

Becker smiled. She walked me though an experiment where I tried alternating letters and corresponding numbers (A,1, B, 2, C, 3) until the inevitable slowdown to think about the next letter. It was a tidy illustration of the disadvantages of doing more than one thing at a time, and Becker suggests doing a single task from beginning to end. "Flow matters," she said. Like binge-watching, I said. "Actually, that's helpful. It fits my theory of flow. But only if it is something that replenishes you."

Yes, I agreed, but what about the six-hour Ken Burns cancer documentary on my TiVo? It should replenish me intellectually, but after a long day I don't know if six hours of cancer replenishes me psychologically.

"I'm hearing a 'should' and a 'want,' and those are polar extremes."

"Should I watch the six-hour cancer documentary?" "How would you feel?"

"Like I don't want to." "Because?" "I would be sad." Becker sighed. "Has any of this film already filtered into your life?" she asked. "Through an article, perhaps?"

"Well, it's an adaptation of a history named 'The Emperor of All Maladies' ... which I have read."

She studied me a long moment. "You don't make a good case for the cancer thing. I say, ruthlessly delete."