

# Deep in Texas, News Anchors and Teletubbies Are Missing

By JEANNIE RALSTON

I'VE certainly cried over television before. Those stock triumph-over-tragedy movies have been known to reduce me to a quivering mess of smeared mascara, and even though I know I'm being had, I always fall victim to the schmaltzy AT&T commercials. And oh yes, when I was younger and less hardened to the vagaries of professional sports, I used to cry whenever the Minnesota Vikings lost. (In those days, that meant quite often.) But until last month, I had never cried over my television service.

In this electronic age, we take television service for granted. For most Americans, Katie Couric is either captured out of thin air by an antenna or piped in via cable. That's for most Americans. I was part of most America for 35 years, until my husband, a photographer who can live anywhere for his work, decided that he wanted to be in the country, far from the urban plagues of crowds and crime. I'd spent 10 years in New York and four in Austin, Tex., and though living in the country wasn't my dream, it wasn't my nightmare either. So off we went to a stone barn we had renovated on a 200-acre piece of land 50 miles southwest of Austin in the middle of the Texas Hill Country, with its undulating horizon, massive live oaks and improbably green rivers.

I am a freelance writer, and like many people who flee the city for the serene countryside, I had hoped that I could conduct business as effectively as I had before via fax, Federal Express and the Internet — albeit with a few limitations, like a 1 P.M. Federal Express pickup time.

But there have been some challenges. Before the phone company upgraded our lines, we would occasionally think a vacuum cleaner had called when we picked up the receiver. "Those squirrels have been chewing on the wires again," the technician would say when he came out to investigate the static. For a year after we moved here, we had to use a long-distance number to connect to America Online, which inhibited any surfing urges. Progress finally came to Podunk in the form of a local server.

We had trouble with our television, too. Even with a decent antenna, the picture looked like the closest thing the Hill Country would ever see to a blizzard. But the solution seemed easy: a satellite dish. Not a huge, wading-pool-size number that would look as if you were communicating with aliens, but a compact, 18-inch dish. We mounted it on our dog kennel and got beautiful reception on a stupefying array of channels.

For some time, we felt that we had a slight technological edge over our city friends. Not only because of the vast selection of stations, but also because we received our networks from distant cities (satellite providers do not tailor their transmissions to local markets). I could sit in my living room with cows roaming in nearby fields, and — in what seemed like a geogra-



Mathew Sturtevant for The New York Times

**AT LEAST THEY STILL HAVE BOOKS** Jeannie Ralston, at her home in the Texas Hill Country, reads to her son, Gus.

phy warp — I could watch Chuck Scarborough and Sue Simmons deliver New York news. Sometimes I pretended that I still lived there and that if I opened my door, I'd be back on my old Chelsea sidewalk.

We also got a West Coast station for every network, so if I missed "60 Minutes" at 6 P.M., I could catch it on the CBS station out of San Francisco at 9 P.M. One of our ABC stations came from Nashville, close to my hometown, so I was able to keep up on weather and political races there. The media junkie in me was ecstatic. I had a strange sense that even though I was physically in the middle of nowhere, I was living everywhere in the country at once. (But we couldn't get our local television news because satellite services offer very little local programming; for that, we relied on radio and the Austin paper. (If you live beyond the suburbs of New York or other cities, you, too, might find you can't receive local news.)

Any feeling of privilege came to a screeching halt in September, when I clicked on PBS so my 17-month-old son could watch Teletubbies. The screen was black, except for a note advising me to call Direct TV, my satellite provider. I soon found that all the networks were off — Fox, ABC, CBS and NBC — though I still received the other 300-some channels, from CNN to the Animal Planet network.

After making a few distraught calls, this is what I learned: A law passed by Congress in 1988 stipulated that a house was not allowed to get network programs via satellite dish unless it was "unserved," which

means that it can't get an acceptable picture from local affiliates via antenna.

No one really paid attention to this for some years, and many viewers in cities and suburbs bought dishes and got their networks from far-off markets.

That all changed when the Fox and CBS affiliates in Miami went to Federal District Court in 1997 and sued Primetime 24, which feeds the networks to satellite providers like Direct TV. The affiliates believed that they were losing viewers and advertising dollars because many people in their viewing area were getting their "Ally McBeal" and "The Cosby Show" from stations far from South Beach. In July a judge ordered all satellite providers to stop offering networks to anyone who had signed up after March 1997 who is not considered unserved.

Although the injunction will not go into effect until next February and related litigation is still going on, Direct TV has begun turning off some customers' service now regardless of when they signed up, so it will be in compliance with the ruling. The Federal Communications Commission estimates that two million people nationwide will be affected by the judge's order.

I DIDN'T worry too much when I heard this. I was sure we would be found to be unserved, remembering the quality of our picture before we got the dish. So I was quite shocked when I was told two weeks after we lost the networks that we didn't qualify as unserved and weren't going to get the service back. I argued with the Direct TV representative, rattling off our rural

credentials — miles from the closest city, hilly terrain that makes reception miserable. "We don't even have a Starbucks, for God's sake," I declared. That gave her pause, but all she could do was advise me to call my Austin affiliates to ask for a waiver.

On the phone, the staff at most affiliates seemed sympathetic and asked me to send a letter explaining my situation. In fact, the letters and my fervent appeals got me nowhere. Three stations sent back a form response, essentially saying that it was my satellite provider's responsibility to come out and test the strength of my signal. If I didn't pass, the satellite provider could give me my service back. I made one more call to Direct TV and was told that it doesn't have enough employees to test the signals at one million homes; I was designated "served" merely because of my ZIP code, which covers a broad swath of land out here.

I was encouraged, however, to join a satellite-provider lobbying effort by calling a toll-free number to vent my frustration at a senator. At least one bill is before Congress to address the problem by redefining an unserved area.

The most exasperating part of this whole experience — the thing that finally brought me to tears — was my call to the PBS affiliate. I expected no problem. It is, after all, Public Television. But the head of the Austin station told me that they weren't granting waivers, period. I was furious. Not only do tax dollars help support the station, but I have been a regular contributor to PBS all my adult life.

I got off the phone and wept, much to my

surprise. It's not that television is that important to me, in a couch-potato sense. It's important in my feeling that I'm maintaining a level of connectedness out here that somehow approximates the level that came so easily in the city. Not getting PBS was the last straw, and somehow a metaphor for life in the country. There are so many amenities

**With satellite service reduced, the world was no longer at the doorstep.**

you give up out here — dry cleaners, newsstands, take-out Chinese — that I couldn't stand losing one more.

I realized that knowing what was going on in the world and the media were not just crucial for my work but also for my sense of who I am. For all its failings and all the statistics about falling viewership, network television creates a sense of national community, and not having access to it left me feeling more isolated than ever from mainstream America. My network-less stint began just about the time the Starr report hit, and I was desperate to know what Ted Koppel was saying about the whole affair. I also wanted to hear the jokes Jay Leno and David Letterman were making.

I also missed national rituals, like the new prime-time season. Though I don't watch many prime-time programs, I do like to check out a hot new show to see what everyone is talking about. And nothing beats the networks for sports. I had to miss the playoffs and World Series this year (what mistake by Chuck Knoblauch?).

Mostly, however, I long for the small traditions that had become part of my daily routine. At 6 P.M. every weekday, while I made dinner, I would watch "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer," the most calming source of news. Now I look at the clock at 6 P.M. and think of what I'm missing. What is Michael Beschloss's take on the impeachment hearings? For me, the shows on network television are similar to what they say about all the cultural activities in Manhattan: It's not whether you indulge in them that matters; it's knowing that you can that makes the difference.

At this point our choices are few. We can simply accept our un-American status until a new bill passes. We can await the arrival in our area of an advanced antenna that some satellite companies are selling in partnership with phone companies, which will also pick up local stations. Or, as my local affiliates advise, we can go the distinctly anti-high-tech route and install a 30-foot antenna on our roof.

But my husband and I spent too much time and money renovating our house to turn it into a pincushion. So for now, esthetics are winning out. But George Clooney and the rest of the folks on "E.R." beckon.