

Community highlights

Written by Cory Zaroni, Community Manager, The Conversation

The Conversation receives a lot of comments each day and you can't read everything. That's why we occasionally end the week with a selection of community highlights: comments we enjoyed or thought worth discussing.

[Why The Simpsons has lost its way](#)

"The Simpsons is one of the mostly widely lauded, and enduring series in TV history," says Travis Holland in his recent article on the show. However, many people are arguing it peaked a long time ago:

A small but vocal group of fans are actively calling for the show to be cancelled. They trace its steep decline back to the late 1990s. Any episode after that they call "Zombie Simpsons". These fans can be found, mostly, on the website Dead Homer Society. It argues that "today [The Simpsons] is a hollow shell, over animated, under thought out, and thoroughly mediocre." Indeed: "The sooner it ends the better off we'll all be."

Many fans of the show got involved in the comments to share their thoughts on The Simpsons' history.

Peter Allen [shared](#) a visit he had to a studio that helps make The Simpsons:

In 2013 I was lucky enough to visit the studio in Burbank where The Simpsons is made, at least that part of the show made in the USA, which is the design, backgrounds and layout. In reference to your comment about the "wage disputes in 2008 and 2011, both of which were said to imperil the show - but didn't" I can tell you that the show was very much imperiled, however the producers take their obligations as employers very seriously and worked wonders to keep staff employed. It wasn't just pay for voice actors at stake, there was a 25% cut across the board that affected writers, designers, artists et al. Fortunately cost savings were found in the production process that allowed staff to keep their jobs. It is too easy for us as armchair critics to say 'cancel it', but as long as The Simpsons pulls in healthy audience numbers why shouldn't

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artists who have spent their entire careers creating a much loved show be allowed to continue to earn a living?

Interestingly, while there are those among us who remember the early episodes fondly, a colleague of mine has children who are fans of the show but refuse to watch the earliest episodes. It seems the animation is too rough and unrefined for them, they find the look of the characters confusing and reject it completely.

Siobhan Lyons [highlighted](#) how the show has lost some of its sentimentality:

Fantastic work, Travis! I've been a huge Simpsons fan all my life (I was born the year after it became a fully fledged show after Tracey Ullman). I think season 9 was the last truly 'great' season, and this aired in 1998, so I would agree that the late 90s saw The Simpsons gradually losing its satirical yet sentimental impact. There were still some good episodes in seasons ten and eleven, but 12 is where I stopped watching religiously. For me The Simpsons now lacks the depth of narrative it once had, and the more emotional aspects of the show, seen in episodes such as 'Mother Simpson', 'Marge Be Not Proud', etc. has been superseded by its grasp to retain comedic appeal by featuring over-the-top gags and gestures. It has lost the subtlety that made it the best show in the history of television.

I don't really care either way if it continues or not- I'll keep watching all the old episodes anyway. I think it would be difficult to return to its former glory. Like all great art, The Simpsons was inevitably a product of its time- 90s postmodernism. So it's hard to keep the magic going.

Have a look at the rest of the comments for more discussion, including a few comments sharing their favourite Simpsons quotes—feel free to add your own, too.

[How parents shape the advantages of being first-born](#)

The effects of birth order are often speculated about. Fortunately, Marian Vidal-Fernandez and Ana Nuevo-Chiquero published an article to discuss their new research:

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We explored changes in parental behaviour as a potential contributor to the birth order effect. Our assessment tool was the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment, which provides a measure of the quality of the cognitive stimulation and emotional support provided by a child's family.

We found that children of higher order of birth - that is, those born second, third or further on from the first child - receive less quality parental cognitive stimulation. Our measures encompassed beneficial inputs for the child's cognitive development, such as reading with the child, cultural outings, or availability of musical instruments in the house. They seem to make a difference.

However, birth order doesn't seem to affect temperament:

Contrary to popular belief, we did not find that birth order is associated with differences in temperament, attachment or behavioural problems among siblings. Regardless of birth position, we also found children to have the same overall self-confidence as teenagers.

John Barker [discussed](#) some related research and what shrinking families may mean for the area:

I recall a major study of this kind which was published in Science journal in the early 1970s. The study looked at the ASAT (university entrance exam) scores of thousands of students, relative to their position in the family constellation. At that time there were many families with 5 or more children (the average family size maxed at 5.2 during the "baby boom"). The results showed a clear decline in ASAT score with position. It answered an apparent issue that there was a decline in "education standards", which was actually later siblings of the boom sitting their ASAT.

This result is not surprising. One can compare the cognitive behaviour of a first born with that of having a single dog. The dog simply perceives itself as one of the pack, which is humans. Similarly, the humans tend to treat the dog as one of their pack. The dog responds positively to the demands to behave like a human. Alternatively, if there are two or more dogs, the dogs form

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their own pack and tend to live in “dog-world” and are less “disciplined”

Similarly, the first child perceives itself as one of the pack, which is adult and is (generally) more reasoning than childlike. The second and subsequent children have more experience with other children-their siblings. The US study found that the later children were more sociable, ie they had greater negotiating skills, seemingly because they were pitched in a struggle for parental attention, as well as a scramble for toys etc.

Few people these days have enough children to observe all of this. With an increasing number of single-child families, one might surmise an increase in “academic” abilities- which might be offset by other factors- such as early admission to childcare, where the single child becomes a member of a very large “family” of “siblings”, who, incidentally, are more like sextuplets than the usual age-spread of a large family.

I muse as a father of 7 children.

Can the arts sector reinvent itself?

The arts sector is, in its current form, unsustainable, according to David Pledger. His article discussed one way to go about changing that:

The establishment of a think-tank dedicated to the arts and culture sector is a necessity. Historically, policy research has been the remit of the Australia Council, however its proximity to government has been cut from arms-length to shoulder-length. This was evident during the Senate Inquiry into the Arts when research critical to the argument supporting the centrality of the small-medium sector was not released despite repeated requests from Ben Eltham. Any research capacity needs to be independent of government influence.

Such an entity needs to be established on principles that are idiosyncratic to the arts so that any measurement focus is on social affect not economic effect. It also needs to operate within the knowledge that a dominant pathology of managerialism is the “measurement virus”, which

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deems anything that is not measurable to be valueless.

Juanita Deharo [mentioned](#) the importance of involving practising artists in any attempt at reinventing the sector:

Can the arts 'sector' reinvent itself? Not until 'the arts sector' refers primarily to practicing artists, not to the myriad of small, medium and large organisations that dominate every public conversation about the arts and cultural policy. Bravo to Scott Redford for speaking up, but it will take a lot more than that to change the system.

A 'think tank' of 'the sector' would no doubt be attended by arts administrators and managers from all levels who would indicate the need to strengthen and fund their own interests while purporting to speak for art and artists. Artists, of course, would not be invited, and if they were would not be able to afford to attend. It's a bit like having a summit on indigenous affairs (probably in Sydney or Canberra) attended only by white bureaucrats and politicians.

[How the Internet was born: from the ARPANET to the Internet](#)

In the final part of his four-part series on the birth of the internet, Giovanni Navarra describes the evolution of ARPANET to today's internet:

Several decades after the journey began, we have yet to reach the full potential of the 'Intergalactic Network' imagined by Licklider in the early 1960s. However, the quasi-perfect symbiosis between humans and computers that we experience every day, albeit not without shadows, it is arguably one of humanity's greatest accomplishments.

Anita Spinks [described](#) why she appreciates the internet and, in doing so, may have described the motivations of a great many of The Conversation's commenters:

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As one who always liked to be right about everything, the internet is the greatest boon. Having internet access at my very fingertips by way of a smartphone is better than sliced bread; it's amazing! I couldn't go back! The state of unknowing would do me in!

Connectivity and its spinoffs are great. A tool for sharing ideas is great also. But...the ability to point to a fact or data on a reliable source is wonderful. Till now, what passed for credible information was a mixture of lies, old wife's tales and wishful thinking. Now we can assert categorically, 'yes, glaciers are melting; this is what they look like from space!'

This doesn't mean that deliberate lies, old wife's tales and wishful thinking are now longer with us. There's many an unreliable source to fool the unwary. I think the number of those informed is growing. Each new set of citizens is better educated than the last, especially in the way of technology. Who knows what they'll invent?

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