

As we enter the new millennium it's difficult to avoid thinking about how the world is changing. In the 1980s few people had even seen a computer, let alone owned one. Now they are on most children's Christmas wish lists. In the 1990s satellite television was a new and wondrous thing – no less than sixteen channels through one aerial! Compare that figure with the hundreds available today. Digital broadcasting has changed our lives to such an extent that the question is no longer 'TV or not TV?' (to misquote Shakespeare), but 'Could we manage without it?' Can you imagine life a hundred years ago, when there was neither television nor radio? For us, it doesn't bear thinking about, but perhaps our great-grandparents were as content to sit around a piano as we are to stare at a screen. There would have been no disagreement about what channel to watch, at least.

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Which would you choose as the better of the two periods in which to live? In 1900 there was certainly less leisure time, accommodation was terribly cramped, and there were two world wars to come (not to mention the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918, which was responsible for the deaths of more British people than the Second World War preceding it); a holiday was a luxury and there were no modern conveniences. I am not, of course, implying that all is now perfect. Today we have global warming, gridlocked traffic, GMO foods, BSE, ME, AIDS and many other unwelcome contractions, abbreviations and acronyms – problems all partly or wholly attributable to technological advances. On balance, though, I think I would prefer to take my chances in today's silicone-enhanced world of bits and bytes than in the troubled times of our forebears.

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