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Left in the Flat-Screen Dust

Old-Model TVs Are So Toxic, You Can't Give 'Em Away. Literally.

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This land is your land, this land is clunker land. From clunker cars to Jonathan Carroll's kitchen table, where a 20-inch Philips TV sits unplugged awaiting someone -- anyone -- to fire it up again before next week's season premiere of "Dancing With the Stars."

The TV works fine, Carroll says in a Craigslist ad.

Only \$40. Just a few years old. Perfect for a dorm

room. Yet nobody has responded to the offer. "Not even the scammers," Carroll said. "They don't bother." Similar ads are piling up: "32" Panasonic TV 2000. Perfect working condition. Like New." And "19 inch tv - \$19."

Alas, these televisions don't have much going for them. In technological terms, they use cathode-ray tubes -- CRTs. In layman's language, they are clunkers. Like Formica countertops displaced by granite, they no longer seem sleek. Like gas-guzzling autos surpassed by hybrids, they can no longer claim the cutting edge. They are fully functional dinosaurs in a high-def age. They just aren't, like Carroll's new TV, flat.

"It's amazing that nobody wants a perfectly good TV," Carroll said. "It even has a remote."

America's unquenchable craving, even in a recession, for the latest and greatest in electronics, and the nation's switch to digital television broadcasting in June, have combined to send consumers racing for flat-screen TVs -- and has made them anxious to rid their homes of their tube-based relics. Carroll and others worry that nobody will take their old TVs, not even for free, and local governments are scrambling to stop the rejects, laden with lead, from being dumped in landfills or poor Asian countries.

"Our society consumes a lot of electronics, whether it be computers, cellphones, TiVos, stereos or TVs, and these days, these things have a very limited life span," said Peter Karasik, who, as manager of Montgomery County's transfer station has a canary-in-the-coal-mine view of the country's electronics fashions.

In no segment of the electronics industry is the new supplanting the old faster than for boob tubes. Last year, 91 percent of the 37 million TVs sold in the United States had flat screens, according to the market research firm DisplaySearch. The number of tube TVs sold has fallen spectacularly, from 15.6 million in 2006 to 3.1 million last year. Asking a Best Buy salesman where the tube TVs are is a fail-safe way to induce giggles. The chain doesn't sell them anymore.

As new TVs enter the home, many people hide the old ones in basements, garages or closets. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 99 million TVs were stored this way two years ago. But many TVs are simply tossed. In 2007, 27 million units were discarded, and 77 percent of them were

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tossed out with the trash (most of the rest are recycled).

Responding to potential landfill contamination, 18 states, including Virginia and Maryland, require manufacturers to help pay for electronics recycling. Montgomery County's recycling program took in 122 tons of TVs in July, more than double the load in July of last year.

"Ever since the human being appeared, we've been hard-wired to hunt for better and bigger," said Martin Lindstrom, a marketing guru and author of "Buyology." "And that makes us think, 'I don't want to end up being the last person on planet Earth left with a CRT.' "

Carroll executed a succession plan in his District apartment: New flat screen is installed in living room, living room tube moves to the bedroom, the little Philips in the bedroom goes to Craigslist. Across the country, clunker pathways vary according to size of home and shape of family. Some TVs shift from bedrooms to basements to garages. Others migrate to college dorms. "It's the TV shuffle," Carroll said.

Things get trickier when the old TV is leaving the family entirely. Andrea Johnson and her fiance have found it difficult to get rid of her 20-inch Toshiba. She tried to sell it on Craigslist and got some responses, but then nobody showed to pick it up. Johnson, of Silver Spring, turned to hawking the TV through Facebook. That has generated a few bites from friends. "I actually feel better about doing it this way since I know it will go to a good home," she said.

Carroll offered his TV free on Craigslist and got some interest, but no solid taker. If nothing clicks for Carroll and Johnson, their options include the dump, which neither prefers, and Goodwill, which still accepts donations of TVs if they are digital-ready. Goodwill no longer takes models lacking a coaxial cable connection. And there is recycling. In Montgomery, where Johnson lives, the government pays e-Structors, an Elkridge company, 7.2 cents a pound to pick up clunker TVs and strip them for parts. The recession has driven commodity prices so low that the material inside the TV is worth less than the cost of recycling it.

Several electronics companies, including Toshiba, offer free take-back programs. Johnson could take her Toshiba to one of four recycling centers in Maryland. Carroll, with a Philips, isn't as fortunate. The company has no recycling program. Best Buy accepts clunker drop-offs at its stores, and its Geek Squad subsidiary will haul away an old TV when installing a new flat-screen.

Best Buy Geeks Brian Parsons and Denver Mowat arrived at Anton Garcia's home in Bowie this week to install a 46-inch Sony flat-screen and home theater system. "Here goes my back," Mowat predicted as he picked up Garcia's 30-inch clunker, the latest in a long series. Parsons replied: "You're 10 years younger than me. I don't want to hear it."

The Geeks removed the clunker without injury and plopped it on their truck to begin its journey to a recycling center. The Geeks returned a tad out of breath, set the 46-inch beauty on a stand and wired the room for surround sound.

Time to test the new gear: In went "Mission Impossible 3." They switched off the lights. There was Tom Cruise. There was the sweat on his face. Garcia and the Geeks watched. And kept watching. Finally, after it appeared nobody was going to peel his eyes off the screen, Garcia delivered the buzz kill: "Well, I don't want to keep you guys any longer."

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