

## **Affluenza: the all consuming epidemic, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.**

© 2005 John de Graaf, David Wann and Thomas Naylor (USA)

## **Affluenza: when too much is never enough**

© 2005 Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss (Australia)

Were you to find the word in the dictionary, you would read ...

**affluenza, n. a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more**

**Affluenza was the title to a 1997 American PBS TV documentary by de Graaf and co-producer. We review here his and co-authors' recent 2<sup>nd</sup> edition book and the Australian work written by Hamilton and Denniss (from the Australian Institute, a green think tank)**

**Both these books set out to describe the symptoms of this “condition” (in their respective countries), its causes and cure**

- **The core message is that despite increases in productivity and material well being, we work longer, not shorter, hours and we aren't happier – but you can change that**

**They reinforce for us that excessive consumption, especially that funded by debt, may not only rob you of an early retirement but maybe also happiness**

## Symptoms of Affluenza

### Excessive spending and a low savings rate ...

- **Australia: (-ve 3%) today vs. 16% in 1975; US: 0% today vs. 10% in 1980**
  - **Saving now refers to receiving a discount while shopping “the more you buy the more you save” (also called “spaving” or spending + saving)**
  - **93% of US teenagers report shopping is their favourite activity**
  - **Families now spend more money on restaurant meals than grocery**
  - **Self-storage units (30,000 facilities in the US, 1000 now in Australia); “halfway houses for stuff that we are not yet ready to admit is waste”**

### Rising debt levels

- **Debt now 125% of US income up from 65% in 1980 (125% vs 56% in 1992 in Aus)**

### Declining psychological well being

- **18% of Australians reported using medication to improve well being**

### Absence of personal time

- **“Have you tried making a date with a friend and found you need to look a month ahead in your appointment calendars?”**

**“Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it”**

*columnist Ellen Goodman*

## Today vs 1950s

### Doubling of productivity but rise in working hours

- Australians now work 1855 hrs/yr, longest in OECD (1643 hrs), (US is 1835 hrs)
- Despite 1970's promises we would need to only work 2-3 days a week

### Larger homes

- [US] 2320 vs 950 ft<sup>2</sup> (a now common 3 car garage = size of 1950's home)
- [Aus] 221 vs 115 m<sup>2</sup> despite falling occupancy from 3.6 to 2.6 persons

Megamalls [US]: two shopping centres for every high school, vs less than one

2.2 credit cards/population [US, today], 0.75 [Australia] vs. none

### 10x increased incidence of depression [US]

- 1957 was the year the proportion of Americans describing themselves as "very happy" peaked, never exceeded again
- "we've mutated from citizens to consumers in the last sixty years" [US]

**"Acquisitive people derive their sense of identity and their imagined place in society from the things they own, yet the symbols that confer self-worth and status are at the whim of external forces - of fashion.  
Materialism thus robs us of autonomy"**

***Hamilton and Denniss***

## Causes of Affluenza

### Changing consumer attitudes to personal debt

- Encouraged by “free” credit card rewards and charges for cheques; and the idea the debt results in people acquiring more not fewer things
- “Many will pay the bank 15-20% interest on credit card debt while maintaining a savings balance to avoid admitting they are suffering from Affluenza”

### Spending to compensate for overwork and loss of time (incl. with family)

- The nation that defined itself by the sickie is now afraid to take one [Australia]

### Confusion between wants and needs

- 62% of Australians (46% of those earning \$60k +) say they can't afford to buy everything they need, despite admitting spending \$11b on goods they don't use

### Television raising false expectations of how people live

### An advertising (and PR) industry whose “prime purpose is to promote Affluenza”

- “ it tells us to buy to be loved, accepted. To not buy is to not be loved, acceptable”
- Growing a divergence between the actual and ideal self
  - Eg. to be met by cosmetic surgery, Botox, orthodontics
- “Drug companies responding to affluent societies’ growing neuroticism creating new markets for drugs where demand is underdeveloped”

## The cure

### Adopt “conscious consumption”

- Don't be an impulse buyer; separate your needs from wants; be brand “disloyal”, ie. don't define yourself by what you buy
- Bringing your own grocery bags gives you a better chance of buying only what you need (apparently one reason retailers resist banning plastic)
  - use a “credit card condom” (“don't leave home without it”)

### Vaccinate your children

- Teach them to be critical of marketers increasing attempts to influence them

### Downshift

- Reportedly 1 in 4 Australians between age 30 and 50 downshifted (cut back hours, changed to lower paid job, stopped work, changed careers)
- Rise in the US of the “Voluntary simplicity movement”

### Use new indicators

- eg. GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator) not just GDP

### Change government policy

- Both books end with their thoughts for a new manifesto

## **A breaking news story?**

*In the middle of your TV program, there is an interruption ...*

**A well dressed family of four stands on the stairs looking grim. One of the children is holding a white flag**

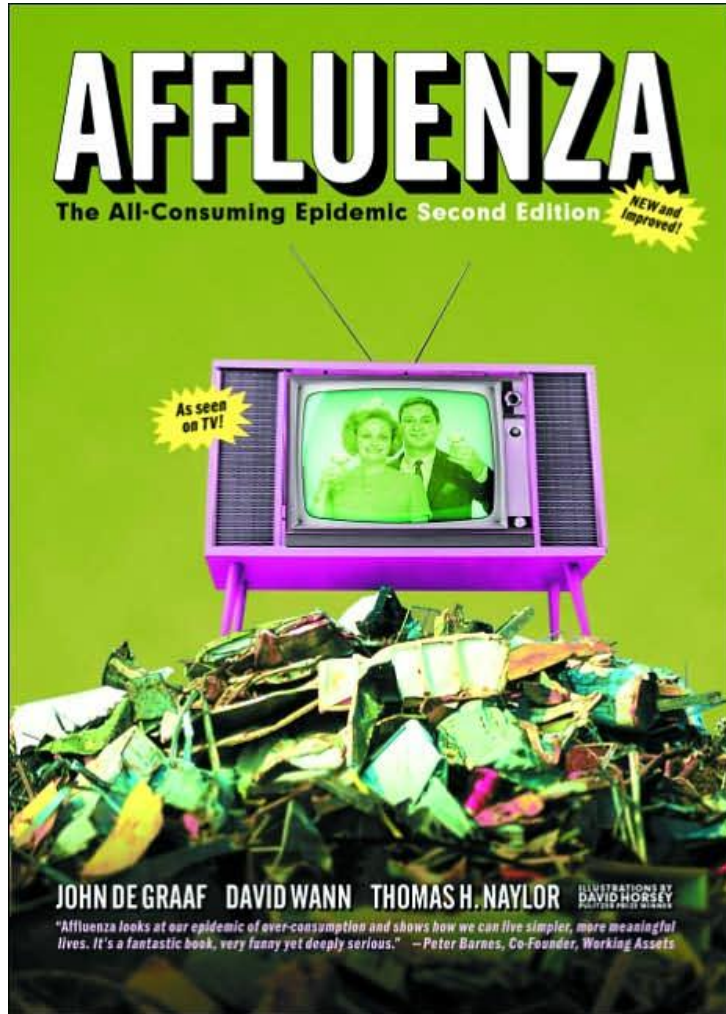
**The reporter quietly voices into the microphone “We are here live at the home of the Joneses – the family you have all been trying to keep up with for years. Well you can stop now, because they have surrendered”**

**A tired Mrs Jones speaks “Its just not worth it. We never see each other anymore. We’re working like dogs. We’re always worried about our kids, and we have so much debt we won’t be able to pay it off for years. We give up. So please, stop trying to keep up with us”**

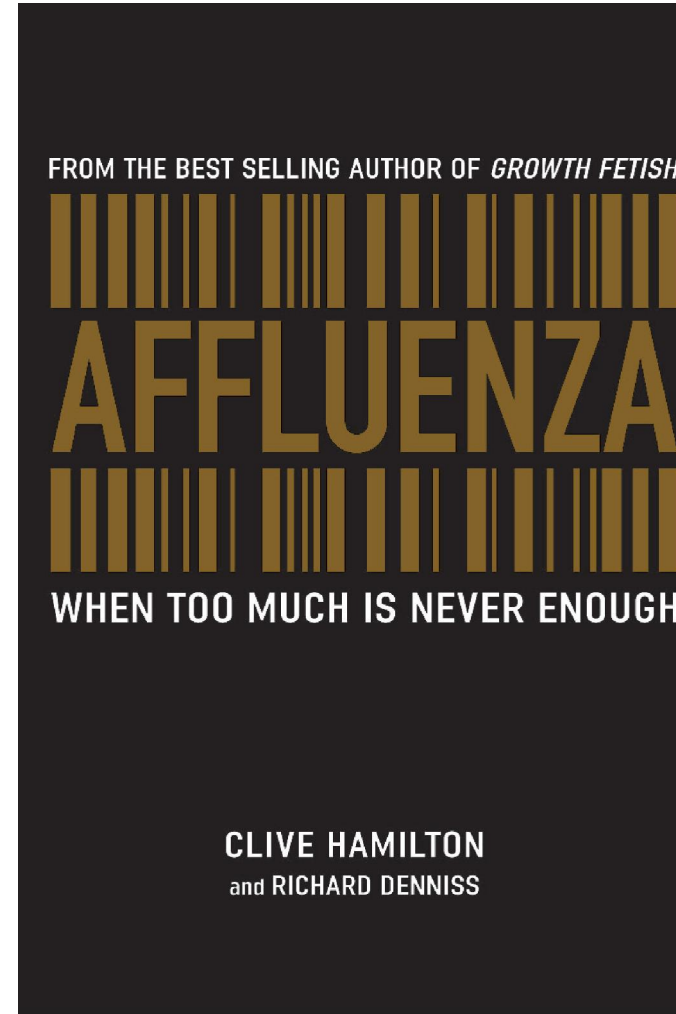
**And now for a commercial break ...**

**from *Affluenza: the all consuming epidemic***

To learn more, read the books



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