

In this 1985 social commentary, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman contends that the perils of television [and digital world] are infecting us with a growing appetite for nonsensical amusement. Taken in by “dangerous nonsense,” we are losing ourselves in amusement, becoming distracted, diverted, & immobilized intellectually, emotionally, & in spheres of political & social discourse. While thirsting for the trivial, the popular, & the sensational, we have become bored with serious analysis, argument, & reasoned discourse. Thus, we are losing opportunities to make our lives count for something great. “For America is engaged in the world’s most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug” (pg. 156). “What is the antidote to a culture’s being drained by laughter?” (pg. 156). “By ushering in the Age of Television, America has given the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future” (pg. 156). Book in two parts: (1) Shift from print to television has powerfully impacted public discourse; it has become our epistemology & culture (chapters 1-5) (2) Critique of Television because the medium promotes entertainment. As a result, the medium is a problem (chapters 6-11). ~ Dr. Paul R. Shockley, 2011. www.prshockley.org

Questions:

[xv]

What happens to us when we become infatuated with and seduced by the digital world?

Does the technology and media free us or imprison us?

Does technology and media improve or degrade our democracy?

Does technology & media make us better citizens or better consumers?

Is technology and media controlling us, affecting our appetites, manipulating our desires, and molding our pursuits?

Is our potential being reduced by entertainment?

If technology and media is not making us better people, what strategies can we devise to maintain control?

[pg. 160]

What is information? What are information? What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conception does each form neglect or mock? What are the main psychic effects of each form? What is the relation between information and reason? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say there is too much information? How would one know? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require? Does television, for example, give a new meaning to “piety,” to “patriotism,” to “privacy”? Does television give a new meaning to “judgment” or to “understanding”? How do different forms of information persuade? Is a newspaper’s “public” different from television’s “public”? How do different information forms dictate the type of content that is expressed?

Two Prophetic Possibilities:

[xix-xx]

George Orwell’s *1984* vs. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

What will threaten our democracy, our well-being, & future?

Orwell feared that one day we would be oppressed by and external system of Big Brother, depriving us of our autonomy, maturity, & history. We would be (a) deprived of information; (b) truth will be concealed; (c) culture will become captured; (d) controlled by pain.

What we hate will ruin us.

Huxley, argued that “dangerous nonsense” would extract the best parts of us.

Instead of hating our oppressors, we would come to adore amusement.

Overwhelmed, saturated, and immobilized by pleasurable nonsense [what I personally call “false pleasures”], we are

following a perilous path whereby we will (a) drown in a sea of irrelevance; (b) embrace trivialities as a way of life (c) relish in passivity & self-centeredness; (d) generate a preoccupation with the sensational.

What we love will ruin us.

Goal & Interesting Observations:

“Show that definitions of truth are derived, at least in part, from the character of the media of communication through which information is conveyed” (pg. 17).

First Observation:

(1) A particular statement acquires a universal significance is called “resonance. Thus, the richness or significance, esp. in evoking an association or strong emotion has taken by place in metaphors (word pictures). “Whatever the original and limited context of its use may have been, a medium has the power to fly far beyond that context into new and unexpected ones. Because of the way it directs us to organize our minds and integrate our experience of the world, it imposes on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms. It sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideas of truth” (pg. 18).

Second Observation:

“the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression. Truth does not, and never has, come unadorned. It must appear in its proper clothing or it is not acknowledged, which is a way of saying that ‘truth’ is a kind of cultural prejudice. Each culture conceives of it as being most authentically expressed in certain symbolic forms that another culture may regard as trivial or irrelevant” (pp. 22-23).

Third Observation:

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall” Technique:

“This is the lesson of all great television commercials: They provide a slogan, a symbol or focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves.... We are inclined to vote for those who personality, family life, and style, as imaged on the screen, give back a better answer than the Queen received.... mean always make their gods in their own image. But to this, television... Those who would be gods refashion themselves into images the viewers would have them be” (pg. 135).

Fourth Observation:

Everything is being presented in the now; no access to the past; no contextual basis (whether theory, vision, or metaphor) or continuity.

“We do not refuse to remember; neither do we find it exactly useless to remember; Rather, we are being rendered unfit to remember. For if remembering is to be something more than nostalgia, it requires a contextual basis—a theory, a vision, a metaphor—something within which facts can be organized and patterns discerned” (pg. 137).

The problem we are now facing is not only that we are encouraged to receive information continuously (e.g., watch TV), but we are also receiving it in a medium that renders the information “simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical, and noncontextual-packaged as entertainment. “In America, we are never denied the opportunity to amuse ourselves” (pg. 141).

Fifth Observation:

“Tyrants of all varieties have always know about the value of providing the masses with amusements as a means of pacifying discontent. But most of them could not have even hoped for a situation in which the masses would ignore that which does not amuse. That is why tyrants have always relied, and still do, on censorship. Censorship, after all, is the tribute tyrants pay to the assumption that a public knows the difference between serious discourse and entertainment-and cares. How delighted would be all the kinds, czars, and fuhrers of the past (and commissars of the present) to know that censorship is not a necessity when all political discourse takes the form of a jest” (pg. 141).

Sixth Observation:

“Sesame Street” Education:

Goal: “Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and would therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture” (pg. 142). But Postman observes that television educational shows like “Sesame Street” undermines traditional education: (a) private preserve vs. place of social interaction; (b) no interaction with teacher vs. interaction with teacher; (c) TV demands attention to images vs. development of language; (d) watching TV is an act of choice vs. school being legal requirement; (e) no penalties exist for failing to watch TV vs. penalties for not attending school; (f) no public decorum vs. proper behavior at school; (g) “Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself” (pg. 143).

HOW WE LEARN IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT WE LEARN

We learn what we do.

“Television educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them”(pg. 144). Three commandments that flow from the philosophy of education which TV offers:

- (1) **No prerequisites:** “Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required... The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice... in doing away with the idea of sequence and continuity in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself” (pg. 147).
- (2) **No perplexity:** “This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied, or worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount” (pp. 148-149). No Perplexity.
- (3) **Avoid Exposition:** The greatest enemy of television-teaching is exposition: “Arguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio or, worse, third-rate printed matter. Thus, television-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music....

“The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment” (pg. 148). “... the content of the school curriculum is being determined by the character of television, and even worse, that character is apparently not included as part of what is studied. One would have thought that the school room is the proper place for students to inquire into the ways in which media of all kinds—including television—shape peoples attitudes and perceptions” (pg. 153). “Television, as I have implied earlier, serves us most usefully when presenting junk entertainment; it serves us most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse—news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion—and turns them into entertainment packages (pg. 159).

Material cited from Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1985, 2005). New Introduction by Andrew Postman.

In sum:

“When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversations become a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act [variety show], then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility” (pg. 156).

How Should We Then Live?

(1) Be aware:

“To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture, is at this late hour, stupidity plain nab simple. Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation. Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history and religion. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerrilla resistance. Here is ideology, pure if not serene. Here is ideology without words, and all the more powerful for their absence. All that is required to make it stick is a population that devoutly believes in the inevitability of progress”(pp. 157-158).

“The problem... does not reside in what people watch. The problem is in that we watch. The solution must be found in how we watch” (pg. 160).

The solution is not shut down technology (pg. 158).

(2) Know what its dangers are! (pg. 161).

(3) Understand that the structure and effects of information.

(4) Do not stop thinking at the expense of entertainment (pg. 163).

“...what afflicted the people in the *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking” (pg. 163).

“The best things on television are its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at most trivial, and therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations. The irony here is that this is what intellectuals and critics are constantly urging television to do. The trouble with such people is that do not take television seriously enough. For, like the printing press, television is nothing less than a philosophy of rhetoric” (pp. 16-17)... I am not making a case for epistemological relativism. Some ways of truth-telling are better than others, and therefore have a healthier influence on the cultures that adopt them. Indeed, I hope to persuade you that the decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of television-based epistemology has had the grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by the minute. And that is why it is necessary for me to drive hard to the point that weight assigned to any form of truth-telling is a function and influence of media of communication. ‘Seeing is believing’ has always had a preeminent status as an epistemological axiom, but ‘saying is believing,’ ‘reading is believing,’ ‘counting is believing,’ ‘deducing is believing,’ and ‘feeling is believing’ are others that have risen or fallen in importance as cultures have undergone media change. As a culture moves from morality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it. Every philosophy is the philosophy of a stage of life. Nietzsche remarked, ‘To which we might add that every epistemology is the epistemology of a stage of media development. Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has within himself and through the techniques of communication he has invented’ (pp. 24).

“Since intelligence is primarily defined as one’s capacity to grasp the truth of things, it follows that what a culture means by intelligence is derived from the character of its important forms of communication” (pp. 24-25).

“Anyone who is even slightly familiar with the history of communications knows that every technology for thinking involves a tradeoff. It giveth and taketh away, although not quite in equal measure. Media change does not necessarily result in equilibrium. It sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it is the other way around... Most of our modern ideas about the uses of the intellect were formed by the printed word, as were our ideas about education, knowledge, truth and information. I will try to demonstrate that as typography moves to the periphery of our culture and television takes its place at the center, the seriousness, clarity and, above all, value of public discourse dangerously declines” (pg. 29).