Lessons from *Amusing Ourselves to De*ath by Neil Postman

“People will come to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think”

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In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman shows how the most popular media of a time in history shapes the discourse of the world. Written in 1985, it focuses on how television has negatively affected the level of public communication in contemporary America but it’s even more relevant today in the internet era.

There are two literary dystopic visions:

* George Orwell, who in “*1984*” warned about a tyrannical state that would ban information to keep the public powerless
* Aldous Huxley, who in “*Brave New World*” depicted a population too amused by distractions — entertainment, leisure, and laughter — to realize that they had been made powerless

Postman believes that the communication inspired by television has turned our world into a more Huxleyan one.

*“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.*

*As Huxley remarked in Brave New World Revisited, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In 1984, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we desire will ruin us.*

*This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right*.”

**The Medium Is the Metaphor**

Politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business. America favors all those who possess both a talent and a format to amuse. As a result, we as people are on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.

New technology introduced new forms of communication:

*“This idea — that there is a content called “the news of the day” — was entirely created by the telegraph (and since amplified by newer media), which made it possible to move decontextualized information over vast spaces at incredible speed. The news of the day is a figment of our technological imagination. It is quite, precisely, a media event. We attend to fragments of events from all over the world because we have multiple media whose forms are well suited to fragmented conversation.”*

Although culture is a creation of speech, it is recreated anew by every medium of communication. Each medium creates a unique mode of communication by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility. Communication on television is largely done in images, not words. The medium is the message.

We do not see nature or intelligence or human motivation or ideology as “it” is but only as our languages are. Languages are our media, the metaphors that create the content of our culture.

**Media as Epistemology**

Postman raises no objection to television’s junk, rather it’s the best part of TV. The problem is when television presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations:

*“We do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant.”*

The concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression. The truth must be presented in a certain clothing or it’s not acknowledged. Each culture conceives of it as being most authentically expressed in certain symbolic forms that another culture may regard as trivial or irrelevant.

Truth is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented.

“*As a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it.”*

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. A major new medium changes the structure of communication by creating new forms of truth-telling.

While some old media do, in fact, disappear, other forms of conversation — speech and writing, for example — will always remain. Thus the epistemology of new forms such as television does not have an entirely unchallenged influence.

*“We have reached, however, a critical mass in that electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment. We are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word.”*

A television-based epistemology does not pollute everything, but rather public communication — our political, religious, informational and commercial forms of conversation — and its surrounding landscape.

**Typographic America**

The influence of the printed word in every area of public communication was insistent and powerful not merely because of the quantity of printed matter but because of its monopoly.

If you wanted to exchange ideas, you did so in a pamphlet, a debate forum, or a lecture. These were all places where the form of printed language lent itself to a more sophisticated and elegant content.

Lectures and debates didn’t sound like idle conversation — they sounded like writing. Spoken sentences were longer, more complex, and more rigorously logical — and listeners, whose minds were used to this kind of print-based language, were able to digest and follow this kind of spoken print.

**The Typographic Mind**

In the time of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, people’s attention span and capacity to comprehend lengthy and complex sentences would have been extraordinary by current standards. At that time, America was in the middle years of its most glorious literary outpouring.

*“One must begin, I think, by pointing to the obvious fact that the written word, and an oratory based upon it, has a content: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content. This may sound odd, but since I shall be arguing soon enough that much of our discourse today has only a marginal propositional content, I must stress the point here. Whenever language is the principal medium of communication — especially language controlled by the rigors of print — an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result. The idea may be banal, the fact irrelevant, the claim false, but there is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one’s thought.”*

In a culture dominated by print, communication follows a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas. The definition of intelligence gives priority to the objective, rational use of the mind. At the same time, it encourages forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content.

The printed word had a monopoly on both attention and intellect, as there were no other means to have access to public knowledge.

*“For two centuries, America declared its intentions, expressed its ideology, designed its laws, sold its products, created its literature and addressed its deities with black squiggles on white paper. It did its talking in typography, and with that as the main feature of its symbolic environment rose to prominence in world civilization.”*

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, print began to show the early signs of its replacement. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.

**The Peek-a-Boo World**

Toward the middle years of the nineteenth century, two ideas came together whose convergence provided twentieth-century America with a new metaphor of public discourse. Their partnership overwhelmed the Age of Exposition, and laid the foundation for the Age of Show Business.

In the middle of the 19th century, two ideas laid the foundation for the Age of Show Business:

* Transportation and communication are disengaged from each other
* Distance was not a constraint on the movement of information

The solution to these problems was electricity. The telegraph wrapped the continent in an information grid and created the possibility of a unified American discourse.

The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography’s definition of communication:

**1. Irrelevance**: The value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity. The telegraph made information into a commodity, a “thing” that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning

“*As Thoreau implied, telegraphy made relevance irrelevant. The abundant flow of information had very little or nothing to do with those to whom it was addressed; that is, with any social or intellectual context in which their lives were embedded.”*

Daily news gives us something to talk about but do not lead to any meaningful action. With the abundance of irrelevant information, the information-action ratio/signal to noise ratio is dramatically altered.

*“What steps do you plan to take to reduce the conflict in the Middle East? Or the rates of inflation, crime and unemployment? What are your plans for preserving the environment or reducing the risk of nuclear war? What do you plan to do about NATO, OPEC, the CIA, affirmative action, and the monstrous treatment of the Baha’is in Iran? I shall take the liberty of answering for you: You plan to do nothing about them.”*

**2. Impotence**: The news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.

Before telegraphy, the information-action ratio was sufficiently close so that most people had a sense of being able to control some of the contingencies in their lives. What people knew about had action-value.

However, this sense of potency was lost with telegraphy, precisely because the whole world became the context for news. Everything became everyone’s business. We were sent information which answered questions we didn’t ask and that did not allow the right of reply.

**3. Incoherence**: Telegraphy brought into being a world of broken time attention. Its main strength was the capacity to move information, not collect it, explain it or analyze it.

*“The telegraph is suited only to the flashing of messages, each to be quickly replaced by a more up-to-date message. Facts push other facts into and then out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation.”*

The telegraph introduced the language of headlines — sensational, fragmented, impersonal. **Its language was discontinuous**: one message had no connection another, each “headline” stood alone as its own context.

“Knowing” the facts took on a new meaning: intelligence meant knowing of lots of things, not knowing about them. Telegraphic communication permitted no time for historical perspectives and gave no priority to the qualitative.

Pseudo-context: a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. The use it provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change, only information with no genuine connection to our lives

The Peek-a-Boo World: all new media that entered the electronic conversation followed the lead of the telegraph and the photograph, amplifying their biases. It is a world without much coherence or sense but also endlessly entertaining.

There is no subject of public interest — politics, news, education, religion, science, sports — that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television.

*“Television has achieved the status of “meta-medium” — an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of ways of knowing as well.”*

We have so thoroughly accepted televisions’ definitions of truth, knowledge, and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane.

The Age of Show Business

**The television is devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment**. The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds. The eye never rests and has always something new to see. It offers a variety of subjects that require minimal skills to understand and is aimed at emotional gratification. Even commercials are exquisitely crafted, always pleasing to the eye and accompanied by exciting music.

“*The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.”*

A news show is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis. Thinking does not play well on television, as there is not much to see in it. It’s not a performing art.

*“The single most important fact about television is that people watch it, which is why it is called “television. ”And what they watch, and like to watch, are moving pictures — millions of them, of short duration and dynamic variety. It is in the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business.”*

People no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. We do not exchange ideas, we exchange images. We do not argue with propositions but with good looks, celebrities, and commercials.

**“Now … This”**

On television, nearly every half hour is a discrete event, separated in content, context, and emotional texture from what precedes and follows it.

News are fragmented and without context, consequences, value, or seriousness; they are pure entertainment. The average length of any news story is forty-five seconds, which is not enough time to explore the whole depth of a story.

And no matter how grave or depressing the news, it’s followed by a series of short commercials.

*“Imagine what you would think of me, and this book, if I were to pause here, tell you that I will return to my discussion in a moment, and then proceed to write a few words in behalf of United Airlines or the Chase Manhattan Bank. You would rightly think that I had no respect for you and, certainly, no respect for the subject. And if I did this not once but several times in each chapter, you would think the whole enterprise unworthy of your attention. Why, then, do we not think a news show similarly unworthy?”*

Television alters the meaning of “being informed” by creating misleading information: misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information that creates the illusion of knowing something.

We lose the sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?

*“Television has achieved the power to define the form in which news must come, and it has also defined how we shall respond to it. In presenting news to us packaged as vaudeville, television induces other media to do the same, so that the total information environment begins to mirror television.”*

USA Today is modeled on the format of television. Television taught magazines that news is nothing but entertainment and the magazines taught television that nothing but entertainment is news. Even the language of radio newscasts has become increasingly decontextualized and discontinuous.

We move into a “trivial pursuit” information environment: news are a source of amusement, not knowledge.

**Shuffle Off to Bethlehem**

On television, religion is presented as an entertainment.

*“What makes these television preachers the enemy of religious experience is not so much their weaknesses but the weaknesses of the medium in which they work.”*

Changing the form of expression also change its meaning, texture or value. Being present and talking to a friend who just lost a loved one has a different meaning than a condolence card.

What is televised is transformed from what it was to something else, which may or may not preserve its former essence.

*“There is no great religious leader — from the Buddha to Moses to Jesus to Mohammed to Luther — who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is “user friendly.” It is too easy to turn off. It is at its most alluring when it speaks the language of dynamic visual imagery.”*

**Reach Out and Elect Someone**

Show business main business is to please the crowd. **With the switch to television, politics became show business.** The idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty, but to appear as if you are. The television is the main vehicle to present political ideas, used in political campaigns and through commercials. Commercials are on average 15 seconds and use visual symbols that help us learn the lessons being taught.

Being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems.

*“The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products.”*

All great television commercials provide a slogan, a symbol or a focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves. Politics followed the same lead:

*“Like television commercials, image politics is a form of therapy, which is why so much of it is charm, good looks, celebrity and personal disclosure.”*

A book is all history. As no other medium before or since, the book promotes a sense of a coherent and usable past.

Television is a speed-of-light medium that permits no access to the past. Everything presented in moving pictures is experienced as happening “now”. Its purpose is to move fragments of information, not to collect and organize them. Television does not ban books, it simply displaces them by being quicker, easier, and shorter.

**Teaching as an Amusing Activity**

The new education is based on the speed-of-light electronic image, with new conceptions of knowledge and how it is acquired.

There are three commandments that form the philosophy of the education which television offers:

1. **No prerequisites**: every television program must be a complete package in itself with no previous knowledge required. It undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself
2. **No perplexity**: perplexity means low ratings. There must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or endured. Any information, story or idea can be made immediately accessible, since the amusement — not the growth — of the learner is important
3. **No exposition**: 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. And when one considers that save for sleeping there is no activity that occupies more of an American youth’s time than television-viewing, we cannot avoid the conclusion that a massive reorientation toward learning is now taking place.”*

Classrooms are now a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities.

**The Huxleyan Warning**

When people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.

The problem, in any case, does not reside in what people watch. The problem is in that we watch. The solution must be found in how we watch. No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are

“[Aldous Huxley] believed that we are in a race between education and disaster, and he wrote continuously about the necessity of our understanding the politics and epistemology of media. For in the end, he was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in 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.”

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