

Book Review: Amusing Ourselves to Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business

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### Book Review: Amusing Ourselves To Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business

In 1985, prominent media theorist, Neil Postman handwrote (Thaler, 2003) a book that fit in well with his overall body of work. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Postman, 1985) is what Amazon.com describes as “a prophetic look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment” (“Amazon.com Description,” n.d.). Mr. Postman worked in the School of Education at New York University for the majority of his career and founded its media ecology program. He was also the Chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at NYU. His work dealt heavily with the influence of media on culture, specifically looking at how the medium itself can cause the culture to shift and evolve (Llorente, 2016). He was also very concerned about the influence of television on children and believed in the power of education to overcome its negative influence (Postman, 1985, p. 162). Although this book was written in 1985, well before the prominence of the computer, social media and the smartphone, it is very easy to read it through the lens of hindsight and place the personal computer, tablet, smartphone, Google Goggles and Apple Watch beside the television in his analysis. Seen in this light, his book seems prophetic in many ways, but there are several inherent flaws that cause it to be problematic and ultimately undermine his final conclusions and suggestions.

### **Analysis and Review**

#### **Main Thesis and its Relevance to Educational Technology**

##### **Exposition**

The main thrust of the first half of the book concerns itself with “...the dissolution of the public discourse in American and its conversion into the arts of show business” (Postman, 1985, p. 5). Postman takes the reader on a journey through history from the Guttenberg Bible through

the invention of the telegraph and the camera and onto the birth of moving pictures in the form of film and finally television. As he goes through the evolution of technology, his dismay at the displacement of the prominence of the printed word is evident, and his examples are compelling. You only need to hear about the seven hour debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1858 (Postman, 1985, p. 44) to understand that the emphasis on the careful crafting of words has disappeared into a Tower of Twittering Babel where political debate is reduced to 144 characters. Postman takes the time to compare two works of dystopian fiction, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, positing that our future lies in the realm of Huxley, where the world's population is controlled by the pleasure given by the "soma drug" (i.e. television) rather than Orwell, with "Big Brother" watching our every move (Postman, 1985, p. xx). Postman goes on to describe the influence of the television on politics, education and religion, showing how the idea of "show business" and the resulting small packaging of messages has pervaded each of them (Postman, 1985).

### **Main Thesis**

All of this exposition leads to his main thesis – that there is an inherent bias in the *way* that we watch television, which affects even the most laudable effort to educate negatively (Postman, 1985, p. 144-146). In the chapter tellingly entitled "Teaching as an Amusing Activity," Postman recalls John Dewey's contention that the mode of delivery of a lesson is an important part of learning – basically that method matters almost as much as content:

Moreover, it is important to add that whether or not "Sesame Street" teaches children their letters and numbers is entirely irrelevant....In other words, the most important thing one learns is always something about *how* one learns. As Dewey wrote in another place,

we learn what we do. Television educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them. (Postman, 1985, p. 144)

From here Postman goes on to state that “the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classrooms, but in the home, in front of the television set...under the jurisdiction of network executives and entertainers” (Postman, 1985, p. 145) and that the main contribution of the television to educational philosophy is the ubiquitous intertwining of education and entertainment (Postman, 1985, p. 146). For this reason, he believes that the mindless entertainment of shows like “The A-Team” and “Cheers” are actually not bad for public health, while shows like “Sesame Street” and “60 Minutes,” which seek to inform and educate are very unhealthy indeed (Postman, 1985, p. 160). This belief puts him at odds with the world of educational technology, in that it takes the “significant vs. no significant debate” (Clark, 1983 and Kozma, 1991) completely off of the table. Instead of striking a balance between the use and over-use of media in education, Postman has completely shut down the debate in the belief that there is no good way to use visual media like the television and film in education. If you take his thesis to its logical conclusion, the number of technological tools in the classroom would be reduced to the overhead projector, the ScanTron grading machine, the copier and the laser pointer, and the field of educational technology would be greatly reduced in the process.

### **Related Research and Media Ecology**

If you look at the research concerning the role of television and other media in the classroom, the material you will find will be most decidedly “ed-tech” in nature. The main thrust of research and debate in the role of television and other media has been seen in two main areas that look at it from completely different angles: excitement over the possibilities of the new

medium in education (i.e. educational technology) or anxiety that viewers/consumers are becoming numb, destructive, increasingly immoral and socially estranged (Lemish, 2014, p. 5). A basic search using the words “television” and “education” in Quick Search will return a list mainly concerning the efficacy of the television in delivering instruction – to adults and/or children on subjects ranging from nutrition to climate change. A similar search on “bias in television” will produce articles about various types of bias – weight, gender, political, sexual, racial, etc. – but there is nary a single one discussing the idea of a bias in *how* television is viewed affecting *what* is viewed, or that we should not even attempt to combine television with education in any way. The place to find this kind of research is at the website of the Media Ecology Association, a group founded by five of Neil Postman’s former students in 1998 (“Goals of the media ecology association,” n.d.). One look at Neil Postman’s definition of media ecology (printed in an earlier work and quoted on their website) is enough to help you to understand the drive behind writing this book:

Media ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. The word ecology implies the study of environments: their structure, content, and impact on people...It tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing, why media make us feel and act as we do. (Postman, n.d.)

### **Suggested Solution**

After basically making the statement that the use of television as an educational tool is problematic at its core (Postman, 1985, p. 160), Postman’s solution is to rely on the schools as “the only mass medium of communication that, in theory, is capable of addressing the problem”

(Postman, 1985, p. 162). His suggestion is to “use education to control television (or the computer, or word process)” (Postman, 1985, p. 162-163), and with his inclusion of the computer and word processor, we can have little doubt that he would have wanted to include the smartphone, tablet, Google Goggles and Apple Watch as well. His hope is to use the school as a tool in “assist(ing) the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture” and “require that they learn how to distance themselves from their forms of information” (Postman, 1985, p. 163). The fact that he does not entertain the thought that it is the family’s responsibility to culturally guide the young or that the students ought to be given a *choice* as to whether or not they *want* to distance themselves is part of the overall flaw in this work and in his proposed solution.

### **The Main Flaws**

#### **Cynicism**

Throughout the entire book there is a strong tone of cynicism in regards to the intelligence and goals of Americans: “We might even say that America was founded by intellectuals, from which it has taken us two centuries and a communications revolution to recover” (Postman, 1985, p. 41). He is not only dismissive of our intellect as compared to our founders, but also doubtful that we have any real interest in and understanding of politics and policy, saying “To an extent difficult to imagine today, earlier Americans were familiar not only with the great legal issues of their time but even with the language famous lawyers used to argue their cases” (Postman, 1985, p. 57), and “No one goes to a movie to find out about government policy or the latest scientific advances” (Postman, 1985, p. 92) and “The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the previous matters (approximately forty-five seconds”, that you must not be morbidly preoccupied with it (let us say, for ninety seconds), and that you must now give your attention to another fragment of news or a commercial” (Postman, 1985, p. 99-

100). Yet evidence clearly shows that Americans are interested in these things. In 1980 the presidential debate between Carter and Reagan drew eighty million viewers, a record that was recently broken by the first presidential debate between Clinton and Trump ("Debate breaks records," 2016). You might lament the degradation of the spoken word, but you cannot argue that a large group of Americans are definitely interested in policy. Looking back in time, you only have to look at the fifty-year successful run of 60 minutes ("60 minutes," 2016) to see that Americans are willing to sit down and pay attention to serious issues being presented on the television. More recently, the success of Glen Beck teaching history on Fox News with extremely strong ratings ("Fox News Transcript," 2010 and Burgiere, 2011) shows that this interest has not waned. Americans have also shown a willingness to attend movies concerning history and politics, such as those produced by Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Sicko*) and Dinesh D'Souza (*2016: Obama's America* and *America: Imagine the World Without Her*).

Also recently, the growth of a fairly new organization called Prager University has shown that Americans want to understand history, religion and politics (Bandler, 2017). Step into the world of the new online media and you will see a wealth of rich political discussion and debate. Yes, this did not yet exist in Postman's time, but that kind of intellect and interest does not grow in a vacuum and it is the explosion of technology like radio, podcasts, YouTube, websites and blogs that allows it to flourish.

In addition to this clearly pessimistic view of the modern American, he is extremely dismissive of the idea of family, stating "American culture stands vigorously opposed to the idea of family" (Postman, 1985, p. 134), which must come as quite a shock to those who get married, have or adopt children (or "furbabies") and raise them in a family setting. While you may argue that we are seeing a breakdown of the family unit, that discussion is one that needs to be dealt

with separately, not casually written off as the product of American culture standing opposed to the very idea of family with nary a statistic or citation to back it up. This may not be central to his main thesis, but it is very telling and makes his solution of handing over cultural training to the schools seem like a reasonable suggestion. This viewpoint is very much an outlook of Reformer Curriculum Theory (Glatthorn, Boschee, & Whitehead, 2003, p. 84) and needs to be stated as such in order to transparently state Postman's own bias. There are some who feel that this is a violation of the rights of parents to culturally guide their own children and is likely one of the motivations in choosing homeschooling over public school.

### **Dismissal of Christianity**

Alongside his low opinion of Americans' intellectual ability, interest in politics, history, science and news, Postman also writes somewhat disparagingly about Christians. While he does hold some respect for the oratory of early American Christians such as George Whitfield or Jonathan Edwards (Postman, 1985, p. 54), he is dismissive of contemporary worship as spectacle and entertainment and has a low opinion of preachers on television (Postman, 1985, p. 114-124). He discussed the faith (or lack thereof) of such founders as Thomas Jefferson, falsely stating that Jefferson "did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and...wrote a version of the Four Gospels from which he removed all references to 'fantastic' events" (Postman, 1985, p. 53). To be fair, he is not a historical scholar and was buying into common myths which were debunked in 2012:

So...Jefferson owned *many* Bibles, belonged to a Bible society and contributed to it, gave out copies of the full unedited text of the traditional Bible, and assisted in publishing and distributing Bibles...There actually is *no* Jefferson Bible, but modern spin is directed at one of two religious works that Jefferson prepared about Jesus...Jefferson's



title for his 1804 work about Jesus was “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, being Extracted from the Account of His Life and Doctrine Given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; Being an Abridgement of the New Testament for the Use of the Indians, Unembarrassed [Uncomplicated] with Matters of Fact or Faith beyond the Level of their Comprehensions.” (Barton, 2012, p. 69-70)

He further goes on to assure his readers that the first four presidents were probably Deists (Postman, 1985, p. 53), in direct contradiction to their own words (“A few declarations of founding fathers,” 2016). This may not seem significant, but it tells us two important things. First, his willingness to latch onto the ideas that our founding fathers were not Christians, without significant research to back up his claim, shows a lack of scholarly concern on such an important subject. Second, he is *not* willing to admit that perhaps at least *some* of the solution to what ails our culture *might* be found in religious teachings. He does admit that “Christianity is a demanding and serious religion” (Postman, 1985, p. 121) and even goes so far to compare the lure of television as idolatry (Postman, 1985, p. 123), but does not take it further to suggest that perhaps the Christians who take their faith seriously have an answer to the lure of the false idol of television and the Huxleyan future he predicts. With a recent poll showing that over seventy percent of worshippers polled reported that they attend worship services to hear sermons or talks that teach them more about scripture and to connect religion to their lives (Saad, 2017), it is easy to wonder if Postman would be willing to look at this as a possible solution or would dismiss it as casually as he dismissed the Christian faith of the founders.

### **Educational Theory**

A third flaw circles back around to Postman’s belief that the inherent bias of television means that television (and film) cannot successfully educate people. He mentions the fact that

“many reputable studies” have shown that “television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order, inferential thinking” (Postman, 1985, p. 152). These statements are proven false by at least two educational theories, one of which was presented before the publication of the book, with the other not presented until five years after his death in 2003.

### ***Schema Theory***

In a nutshell, “cognitive schema theory” is the idea that we build unique “mental models” based on our experiences, with new information coming in, connecting, overlapping, and/or building upon the old (Bible, 2017, p. 2). In very simple terms, schema means personalizing the information that is coming in – framing it in terms that make sense based upon previous experience. The television, especially educational television, offers incredible opportunity in creating educational schema for learners in every field. Ask any avid watcher of CSI, and you’ll likely learn quite a bit about crime scene investigation and the ways to solve a crime. Likewise today I found myself singing a counting song I heard over thirty years ago on *Sesame Street*. While you can express concern for the information our culture is absorbing through the television (and internet and social media), you cannot naysay its ability to transmit effective learning when designed on a solid pedagogical foundation. Additionally, research continually shows that what makes an effective learning experience is when it is made meaningful to the student (Marshik, 2015). A savvy educator will use that and pull in examples, analogies and metaphors from popular culture – including the culture of visual media.

### ***Pavio’s Dual Coding Theory***

In 1990, Pavio put forth the theory that combining verbal and visual learning results in a greater likelihood of information being stored in long-term memory. This is known as “Pavio’s

Dual Coding Theory” (Lohr, 2008, p. 58). While this theory can certainly be pursued in a classroom without a television, video delivery (i.e. television, film, YouTube videos, etc.) is clearly the perfect medium in which to design lessons that follow this theory for maximum learning and retention. This theory has had an enormous impact on the use of moving pictures in education. From the videos of Prager University, to lectures recorded using Camtasia and PowerPoint, to PowerPoint presentations accompanying church sermons in contemporary worship services, this theory can be seen in action virtually everywhere. Postman’s book predates this theory and the accompanying research, but the fact remains that this clearly shows television (and other types of visual media) have an important place in education. We cannot blame Postman for not predicting dual coding theory, but we can still call this a major flaw in the book.

### **Correct Predictions**

The previous criticisms may make you think that this book does not have anything of substance to offer, but that is not the case. The book makes many accurate observations and predictions that will likely leave you nodding your head in exasperated and/or dismayed agreement.

### **Addiction**

Perhaps most importantly, Postman realized that there was a real danger in becoming hooked on television (Postman, 1985, p. xx). What began as an addiction to soap operas (Hecht, 1982) has now turned into Netflix binging (“Netflix binging,” 2014), the red-eyes of early morning showing that you were up all night watching Season 6 of *Justified* on Netflix. More importantly, we are seeing a rise in internet and social media addiction that is extremely concerning. The quest for clicks and likes is directly related to dopamine, a “feel good”

chemical released in the brain (Charman-Anderson, 2009, p. 16). Our current obsession with social media in particular can be traced to this drug that is eerily similar to the soma drug in Huxley's dystopian future. What makes this addiction particularly scary is that you cannot realistically go through life cut off from technology (at least not in the United States). You have to learn how to consume in moderation, much like an eating disorder (Wincent, 2016). Being able to disconnect from social media and not care about the number of "likes" you receive takes a certain maturity that is not always evident in today's culture.

### **The Culture of Show Business**

What makes this addictive behavior even more pathetic is the quality of the content that is pulling us in. From endless rounds of internet cat videos (Palermo, 2015) to our cultural obsession with reality television (Slade, Narro, & Buchanan, 2014), to breathlessly following the Kardashians on Twitter, we seem to be locked into an endless cycle of celebrity-chasing, narcissism and tech-enabled navel gazing, "taking selfies in the perfect lighting," comparing and scrolling "to measure up" (Ahkuoi & Ahkuoi, 2016). Postman also accurately predicted that this entire phenomenon would leak into our political life (Postman, 1985, p. 126), a prediction that would that came to fruition with the election of not one, but two celebrity presidents in succession (Post, 2016, and Fineman, 2013), one from either side of the political aisle.

### **The Use of Television (and Other Media) in Education**

*Bill Nye The Science Guy; Reading Rainbow; Sesame Street; Mythbusters; Wild Kingdom; The Electric Company; School House Rock; White Rabbit Project; How It's Made; Fixer Upper* - these are just a few of the many educational opportunities to be found on television in the past thirty years, and while the idea of a television educational experience dismayed Postman, the amount of learning that is happening on the so-called "idiot box" is

heartening. *Mythbusters* shows viewers the scientific method (Zavrel & Sharpsteen, 2016). *Fixer Upper* can inspire families to save money by purchasing an older home and remodeling. *Sesame Street* teaches letters and numbers. *School House Rock* teaches viewers how a bill gets turned into a law. The continued use of television (i.e. visual media) in education (Lemish, 2014 and Strasburger, 2010) is something that Postman predicted, but unless you agree with his idea that the inherent bias in television somehow taints the learning experience, you will likely not be concerned, but rather delighted. And again, these shows offer multiple opportunities for educators to pull in content in many different ways.

### **Incorrect Predictions – Orwell was right too**

Postman's setup in his introduction was to show the difference between these two dystopian visions of the futures and show that Huxley had a more accurate vision or prediction. Sadly, the phenomenon of internet addiction shows that this is indeed something that deserves our attention. However, his assertion that Orwell's vision was not a concern proved to be inaccurate.

### **Government Surveillance and Overreach**

George Orwell painted a dismal picture of a future where the government has become "Big Brother" that watches our every move, edits the history books and monitors the information that the citizens receive. Postman confidently stated that there was no sign of this and that "we have less to fear from government restraints than from television glut" (Postman, 1985, p. 140). He believed that censorship was a thing of the past: "The fight against censorship is a nineteenth-century issue which was largely won in the twentieth" (Postman, 1985, p. 141) and that we had nothing to fear from journalists: "In saying this, I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world"

(Postman, 1985, p. 107) He also believed that “those who run television do not limit our access to information, but in fact widen it” (Postman, 1985, p. 141). He actually believed that Americans wouldn’t care enough to take notice if the journalists covering the White House didn’t “expose lies, and thus create the grounds for informed and indignant opinion” (Postman, 1985, p. 108-109). Unfortunately his faith in the press and in “those who run television” (i.e. Hollywood – the film and television industry) has been sadly misplaced.

Not only have we seen instances of severe government overreach and surveillance – from the IRS targeting conservative groups (Keating & Cameron, 2013) to the NSA gathering data on private citizens (Hamilton, 2015, p. 46), it is clear that we are too close to “Big Brother” for comfort - there is also a clear case to be made that censorship is alive and well in several visual media, including television journalism, entertainment and film.

### **Censorship in Journalism and Hollywood**

Postman’s faith in the impartiality of those in charge of television’s content was unfortunately misplaced. Several prominent producers openly admitted that there is a blacklist against conservatives in Hollywood (Shapiro, 2011). In fact, a group called “Friends of Abe” formed for the very purpose of allowing like-minded people from the entertainment industry to come together in secret to discuss their political beliefs (Cieply & Confessor, 2014), which definitely conjures pictures of Big Brother. And unfortunately, the Fourth Estate has decided to forfeit its duties, working to protect presidential candidate Barak Obama from negative stories in the 2008 election (Strong, 2010), feeding questions to presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in advance of the first presidential debate (Borchers, 2016) and giving presidential candidate Donald Trump two billion dollars worth of free media coverage (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). There are arguments on both sides of the political aisle about media bias, and there is clear

evidence that we can no longer blindly trust the media to tell us the truth – or Hollywood to be fair when it comes to politics.

This may not seem relevant when considering this book as a part of the larger educational technology conversation, but it is very relevant because his entire premise rests on the idea that of the two dystopian visions of the future, we only need concern ourselves with Huxley's vision/fears. This informs the entire book, as well as his suggested solution. The reality is that we need to concern ourselves with both. Fortunately, another thing he did not foresee is the death of what is known as the "mainstream media" (print and cable) and the rise of the new online media, where the citizen truly can become the journalist.

### **The Death of the Mainstream Media and the Rise of the Online Media**

In 2008, Eric Alterman wrote in the *New Yorker* that few people have faith that the newspaper, as it exists in printed form, will continue (Alterman, 2008, p. 3). He opined that the rise of the internet and Craigslist have tolled the death knell for print journalism, by making newspapers seem "slow and unresponsive" and by killing ad revenue (Alterman, 2008, p. 4). There is a similar slow death occurring in cable news shows, partly based on the efforts of cost-cutting customers making the switch from cable to web-based services (Risen, 2015) and partly due to the effort of many Americans to take a stand against the concept of bundled cable which funds cable news networks, regardless of whether or not cable subscribers watch them (Nolte, 2016). In fact, the audience and ad revenue for online news sites is now greater than that of the traditional media (Smith, 2014). What is replacing the "mainstream media" as it is known is a wealth of online news sites that have taken the power of the Fourth Estate and put it into the hands of the citizen journalist. People of all political persuasions and beliefs have created blogs, websites, podcasts and videos to report on anything from conspiracy theories to breaking news.

In 2004, a comment on a posting board at FreeRepublic.com led to a group of bloggers exposing the fact that CBS' *60 Minutes* had run a story critical of George W. Bush without first authenticating it (Last, 2004). Online media did the work that the "MSM" did not and exposed the truth before the election. And the beauty of online media, is that anyone with a computer and an internet connection can post content for free – and much of that content is the written word. Postman did not foresee the Orwellian future of the press or the public backlash to it, which means he also did not foresee the vast collection of thoughtfully written articles and blogs concerning everything from politics to religion to education to culture. Print journalism may be dying, but the printed word is far from dead.

### **Conclusion**

Why does it matter that Postman had a cynical view of the interest and intelligence of Americans? Looking at several of his comments, you can see a certain mindset – his mistrust of people to be interested in history, politics, to be genuinely faithful, his casual statement that the family no longer exists – all of this points to his own ideology. He casually stated that all Americans are, in a way, Marxists (Postman, 1985, p. 158), which hints at a bias – a bias that colors both his belief in the nature this crisis and affects his proposed solution. People are not smart enough to pull away from the lure of the technological, therefore they must be trained (some might say indoctrinated) at school.

Why does it matter that he exhibited a certain amount of cynicism against Christianity? He compared the television to idolatry, but never followed the idea to its logical conclusion that perhaps a part (possibly a small part) of the solution is to allow the Church to guide its members in resisting the false gods of technology.



Why does it matter that he did not spend enough time on educational theory, specifically schema theory? It shows that he never gave any credence to the idea that television (and other media such as the computer) could be an incredibly useful tool in an educational setting. Why does it matter that he could not predict the formation of dual coding theory? It wasn't his fault that he couldn't see into the future, but the existence and successful implementation of dual coding and schema theory *proves* that television and other visual media are extremely important tools in an educational setting.

Why does it matter that some of his predictions did not come true? It ultimately comes down to Huxley versus Orwell. Postman's thesis relied on only Huxley's vision being correct. His concern over the implicit bias in the way people watched television caused him to overlook the very real bias in those who control it. He flatly denied that *1984* might also paint an accurate vision of the future. He did not foresee that the printed word would find new life online, instead lamenting at the loss of interest and intellect. It is perhaps the greatest irony that his solution is ultimately Orwellian in nature – having the “State,” through the school system, control what children think about television, the culture and society.

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