Amusing Ourselves to Death

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL POSTMAN

Postman is an American author, cultural critic, theorist and educator. Born in New York City, he played baseball through college before becoming interested in an academic career. He received a Master's Degree from Columbia University's teacher's college, and went on to be affiliated with New York University for about 40 years. He was a prolific writer, and served as a department chair and professor at NYU until his death from lung cancer in 2003. He is best known for his works *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, *Technopoly*, and *The End of Education*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The increasing ubiquity of television in America is at the center of this book's set of concerns. When Postman was writing, computers were becoming more common, but the Internet had not been theorized in any concrete way yet. Postman's account surmises that one of the greatest threats to American life and liberty in 1985 is the proliferation of televisions and television programming.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Postman repeatedly references both *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and *1984* by George Orwell. Postman aims to show that Huxley's dystopian vision of the future is more correct than Orwell's. Postman also references the work of the philosopher of communication and public intellectual Marshall McLuhan quite frequently, and Postman's project builds off of McLuhan's work, especially *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1985
- **Literary Period:** Late Modern / Postmodern Non-fiction
- **Genre:** Cultural Criticism, Media Theory
- **Setting:** United States

EXTRA CREDIT

Print Machine: Postman wrote 18 books and published over 200 articles over the course of his lifetime.

PLOT SUMMARY

Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* opens by saying that Aldous Huxley's vision of the future in his book, *Brave New World*, is one we ought to pay close attention to. Unlike another dystopian novelist, George Orwell, Huxley foresaw that we would eventually be destroyed by that which we love most: entertainment, leisure, and laughter. Orwell's vision of the future—where government overreach is responsible for the death of free speech and thought—is scary, but ultimately incorrect.

From here Postman build off the work of famous media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who wrote that "the medium is the message." Postman agrees with McLuhan, and echoes his argument that the form of a medium determines its content. In other words, the medium of information—whether it's speech, print, sound, image, etc.—has an effect on the information itself.

Postman discusses how discourse worked when America was a print culture. Because form has an effect on content, and print is a rational form of communication, print culture was more rational. Debates were longer and more thoughtful, and the monopoly of print produced a highly literate society. With the invention of the telegraph and the photograph, however, print lost its monopoly. Now people had ways of getting information instantaneously—information that was decontextualized, often irrelevant, and incapable of dealing with difficult abstractions and interpretations. This set the stage for television. Once television became ubiquitous, says Postman, the decline of cultural discourse rapidly became apparent. Because TV is a form of entertainment media, all information has now become entertainment. Politics, news, religion, education, economics—all of it is subject to the rule that entertainment is king.

Postman concludes his book by acknowledging that television cannot and should not be simply eradicated. Rather, he believes that Americans can save themselves by becoming aware of the potential television has to permanently stymie rational discussion. Once we recognize that forms of media wield this kind of power, we will be able to resist the urge to "entertain ourselves to death."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aldous Huxley – The Author of *Brave New World*, a dystopian novel about the demise of culture. Huxley's book imagines a future world where the things we love destroy us: our desire to

be entertained, to be shallowly happy, results in the virtual elimination of thought itself. Postman's book suggests that Huxley's account will be proven right if we are not more mindful of how we interact with media.

George Orwell – The author of *1984*, another dystopian novel. Yet Orwell's dystopia is very different from Huxley's, and portrays the end of free thought and speech as being the result of strict government repression and violent control. Postman's book argues that Orwell was wrong: that the things we love are in fact much more dangerous than the things we hate.

Marshal McLuhan – A media theorist and former teacher of Postman's. A philosopher of communication and a public intellectual, McLuhan famously said "the medium is the message." He believed that the form of a medium had a determinate effect on the content of the medium's message. This insight underlies the whole of Postman's argument.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Reverend Terry, Pat Robinson, and Jimmy Swaggart – Television preachers whom Postman uses to represent the way that entertainment culture has commoditized everything, even supposedly "sacred" spheres of life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FORM AND CONTENT

At the heart of Postman's argument is a claim about a relationship between the form of a medium (where "form" refers to the form the medium takes, e.g. television, spoken language, writing, etc.) and the content of that medium (where content is the information the medium communicates). Postman says that there is a determinate relationship between form and content. This means that the form of a media determines, or has a definitive impact on, its content. Certain kinds of media are suited for certain kinds of discourse, information, or communication. For example, Postman argues that television, as a form of media, is simply not suited for rational discussion or any kind of "serious" content. On the other hand, he believes typography (print and writing) is a form of media perfectly suited for rational content—but not necessarily entertaining content. Spoken language, its own medium separate from print, also determines its own special content: sayings, proverbs, or aphorisms are the dominant kinds of content in oral traditions, where information is communicated primarily by the spoken word.

Postman believes that this determinate relationship between form and content is of vital importance for people, especially Americans, to understand. He notes that too many Americans believe they can get out of television what they once got out of books or other kinds of print media. The implications for this claim are indeed large: if the form of a medium determines its content, then the introduction and dominance of new media, Postman extrapolates, brings with it the dominance of altogether new kinds of content. The difference between print culture and television culture is not simply the difference between writing and watching: it is the difference between a culture dominated by reason and a culture dominated by entertainment.

TYPOGRAPHY VS. IMAGE

The fundamental tension in Postman's account is the opposition between typography, or print, and the image (as in a photograph or on a television screen). This tension is fundamental to Postman's argument largely because (he claims) it is this opposition between print and image which is at the heart of the transition occurring in American discourse and culture at the time of his writing.

America, once highly literate and dependent on print-based forms of communication—including, in Postman's account, books, pamphlets, and public lecture and debate—has now become a culture of the image. Newspapers feature photographs alongside headlines, thus translating news and journalism into an image-centric format. Even more importantly, television has become so central in American culture that it has dominated and overcome print culture.

Postman is often bold about choosing sides in the historical confrontation between print and image. He believes cultures of the image are degraded, less capable of reason, and less politically engaged than cultures of print media. His book then seeks to expose the ways in which television and other image media (like photography) have changed the way Americans understand, behave, believe and even think—and for the most part, Postman argues that these new forms of thought, belief, and understanding are inferior to those of the past.

THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND MEDIA

Much of the book's argument takes the form of a historical account that tracks the development of public discourse over time. Postman's historical account is actually quite vast in scope: *The Iliad*, Plato, Jesus, the Protestant Reformation, and American history from its colonization to the present are all included in the story Postman tells about the history of media and their effects on culture. His argument essentially articulates how, in many ways, the history of public discourse is the history of different

media forms achieving dominance. *The Iliad* was the product of an oral culture, while in Plato's day, the rise of writing was at the center of a cultural shift. The Protestant Reformation was then made possible by the printing press, and in America, there is now a shift occurring between print and image.

Along with providing a lens through which to view the history of public discourse, Postman is also invested in demonstrating that this history, especially in America, is headed in a certain direction. In other words, not all kind of discourse are, in Postman's account, created equal. His historical account then asks us to wonder about the damage potentially caused by the legacy of television in American history.

NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT

A central consideration of Postman's argument is the role that the news (whether in the newspaper or on television) plays in the development of the new American culture. Postman believes that the news is a particularly insidious force in the transformation of America from a culture of reason into a culture of entertainment.

While the news seems at first glance like an objective dissemination of knowledge and information, Postman maintains that the news actually represents the commodification of knowledge, and the transformation of information into mere entertainment. The news is information that we always want (and always get, via daily papers and news shows), but not information that we actually use. It is thus, according to Postman, not really information at all—it is entertainment, and thus a commodity.

PROGRESS, PREDICTION, AND THE UNFORESEEN FUTURE

Much of Postman's text—which was written in 1985—involves working towards a kind of prediction or projection of an imagined future. As contemporary, 21st century readers, we must then ask ourselves which parts of Postman's argument resonate with our present reality, and which parts ring false given advances in technology. These questions are central to the thematic content of book—and though Postman cannot know the answers, his text certainly asks them as well.

Postman's entire text is framed by the disagreement between the work of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Orwell's novel imagines a world where government repression is responsible for the loss of life, love, and freedom in a hypothetical dystopian future. *Brave New World*, meanwhile, imagines that people's desire for shallow entertainment and technology, rather than government repression, will bring about the demise of culture as we know it. Postman supposes that Huxley's account of the future will be proven more "right" than Orwell's. In other words, Postman believes that entertainment will bring down culture before the government does. This gesture acknowledges the fact that texts *about the future* will eventually be proven "right" or "wrong." This conclusion must also then apply to Postman's own text, which, though not a fictional literary dystopia, also makes claims about where we, as a culture, are headed. From the start, then, Postman situates his text as the property of imagined future readers, and he acknowledges that his arguments will eventually be proven "right" or "wrong" when the future actually unfolds.

Forty years have now passed since the publication of Postman's investigation of media and technology and their effects on culture. As "future readers," we are thus in a position to evaluate how "right" or "wrong" Postman's predictions were. For example, Postman acknowledges the ascendancy of computers, but maintains that everything we know about computers comes from television. Naturally the Internet, though not even in existence at the time of this book's composition, now hangs over the text in a way that demands our attention as a new kind of media and public discourse. This is indicative of a larger demand placed upon the reader of a text like this: to investigate how it maps onto the present state of media technologies in America.

Postman's text interacts with the "future" (which includes our present moment) in ways that Postman could not have foreseen, and this is true of perhaps all works of "Media Theory," which became popular in the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, contemporary readers of this text are—and should be—compelled to wonder how Postman's text holds up today—particularly as television remains as ubiquitous as ever, and the Internet has come to form an entirely new kind of public discourse.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THOMAS PAINE'S COMMON SENSE

Postman believes that the wide circulation of Thomas Paine's famous 1776 pamphlet (an argument for American freedom from the British monarchy) is a symbol of the strength of print culture in America's foundational period. The popularity of *Common Sense* indicated a desire to know things through reason and to engage in meaningful, lengthy discourses about issues most relevant to the American public. This also demonstrated that America was enjoying a true age of reason and enlightenment. For Postman, *Common Sense* is most potent as a symbol when we consider the impossibility of an argumentative pamphlet having such an impact in 20th century society. Thus *Common Sense* is an aptly

titled stand-in for what we used to have, and for what we've lost in the rise of the Age of Show Business.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* published in 2005.

Foreward Quotes

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

Related Characters: George Orwell, Aldous Huxley

Related Themes:

Page Number: xx

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has summarized the plots of two famous dystopian novels: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*and George Orwell's *1984*. Both novels depict a totalitarian government which, through carefully constructed technologies of control, have repressed the populations over which they rule such that political dissent is impossible. However, these methods of control differ vastly––in Orwell's novel, surveillance technologies, economic scarcity, and strict censorship mean that there are no opportunities to think, watch, read, or say anything that opposes the hate-filled, ultranationalistic government agenda. Huxley, meanwhile, depicts a society in which citizens have endless opportunity for entertainment, including drugs, travel, sex, or "feelies," a spin off "movies" (which were a fairly new medium in Huxley's time).

By saying that Huxley "was right," Postman implies that it would be more plausible for a population to be subdued and controlled by entertainment than by severe and direct government oppression. Crucially, he also suggests that Huxley was "right" in the sense that his dystopian vision is close – uncomfortably close – to the reality of 1980s American society. This comparison illustrates Postman's view that television has acclimatized the population to constant, shallow entertainment, and that in so doing has eroded citizen's ability to engage in rational thought and discourse.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has described the ways in which the increasing prevalence of image-based communication has resulted in a culture where appearances and style matter more than content. He has introduced the ideas of his former teacher, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who claimed "the medium is the message," although Postman himself adapts this statement to "the medium is the metaphor," meaning that communicative media convey indirect messages to audiences. In the final sentences of this chapter, Postman illustrates the link between languages, media, metaphor, and "the content of our culture." By "languages", Postman means not only different tongues, such as English and Spanish, but all modes of communication more generally, including nonverbal and symbolic languages.

Postman's words here emphasize the fact that different media are not simply transparent, interchangeable vehicles through which ideas are neutrally transmitted. While a book and a TV show may appear to express the same message, the very fact that this message is being conveyed via two different media means that the message itself will be different. Postman argues that this, in turn, has a significant impact on culture, as the kinds of messages being circulated in public discourse affect people's thoughts, expectations, and behaviors.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Like the fish who survive a toxic river and the boatmen who sail on it, there still dwell among us those whose sense of things is largely influenced by older and clearer waters…

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has illustrated the way in which media determines the *epistemology* of a given culture, meaning that the media we use affects what we think counts as knowledge, as well as influencing how this knowledge is gained, disseminated, and used. He has argued that "television-based epistemology" is shallow and absurd, in comparison to print-based epistemology which is more sophisticated, reasonable, and reliable. At the end of the chapter, Postman points out that just because one form of media is dominant,

this doesn't mean that others become completely irrelevant. As someone critical of television and the discourse it produces, Postman compares himself to a fish in a "toxic river." In writing this book, Postman hopes to encourage others to become more critical of television-based knowledge and culture.

Though many may agree with Postman's argument here, this passage also leaves Postman vulnerable to charges of elitism. First, he seems to position himself as exceptionally immune to the influence of television and capable of rational critique. Second, in the years since *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was published, many scholars have described television as a democratizing medium, accessible to people who may not have the knowledge, time, or resources to consume sophisticated printed texts. Other movements of thought would also dispute Postman's claim to be a clear-headed fish in toxic waters. If we are all a product of the time in which we live, what qualifies Postman to distinguish himself as more connected to the "rational" past than others?

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The only communication event that could produce such collective attention in today's America is the Superbowl.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has described the print culture of 17th and 18th century America in positive, nostalgic terms, mentioning the high literacy rates and the popularity of Thomas Paine's pre-Revolutionary War pamphlet "Common Sense", which sold a total of 3 million copies despite being a complex, intellectually rigorous text. He concludes disdainfully that in the America of the 1980s only the Superbowl would receive such a level of collective public attention. There is much to critique about Postman's romanticization of colonial America. Perhaps the most crucial point is that, if print culture created such rational, sophisticated ways of thinking, how did that same culture allow and encourage the institution of slavery? (Note the vast majority of slaves were illiterate, and teaching a slave to read was even a crime.)

Postman evidently views mass interest in forms of entertainment such as the Superbowl as inherently detracting from public engagement with serious political and philosophical issues. However, it is not necessarily the case that just because people consume sports and other supposedly shallow forms of entertainment, that they are not also devoting time to more complex issues as well. Sports have played a large role in human life throughout history––including in colonial America––and have long harmoniously coincided with intellectual pursuits.

❝ When Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, his reception equaled the adulation we offer today to television stars, quarter- backs, and Michael Jackson...

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has moved on to describe 19th century America, continuing to emphasize that this era was dominated by mass public engagement with written texts and thus, by implication, with serious rational discourse. He points out that the popularity of Charles Dickens was comparable to the contemporary popularity of "television stars, quarter-backs, and Michael Jackson." Postman relies on the assumption that the audience will agree that Dickens is a superior cultural figure to a television star or Michael Jackson. Yet this assumption warrants critical examination. From the vantage point of the present day, we can observe that Michael Jackson had a major impact on American culture; his popularity resulted in everything from increased racial integration to the widespread adoption of complex new dance techniques.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that in the 19th century, the novel was often considered a shallow, unsophisticated genre, much in the same way as Postman describes television. During Dickens' time, other art forms such as tragic drama, opera, and lyric poetry were thought to be far more important and admirable than the novel. Just as Postman derides mass engagement with television as evidence of a superficial, simplistic culture, so too was the novel dismissed for its accessibility and popularity. Indeed, many 19th century critics argued that the novel was ruining *their* culture in the same way as Postman accuses television of ruining his.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The use of language as a means of complex argument was an important, pleasurable and common form of discourse in almost every public arena...

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has turned to another historical example of public discourse, the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas that occurred in 1858. Postman has explained that these debates are marvelous by contemporary standards both in their length––audiences listened attentively for hours at a time––but also for the complexity of language used. In this passage, he emphasizes that this intellectually rigorous use of language was considered an important and enjoyable part of life in the past. Once again, Postman uses a specific event to illustrate the differences between the past and the present. On one level, this is persuasive, as it effectively reveals the stark difference in the kinds of activities that people pursued and enjoyed in the nineteenth century versus the 1980s.

On the other hand, there are also several problems with this method of comparison. As this passage shows, Postman frequently generalizes––for example, by saying that the debates between Lincoln and Douglas were representative of discourse taking place in "almost every public arena." In nineteenth-century America (as in the present), public arenas differed vastly from one another, depending on their location, the local population, and their primary function. It is therefore not possible to describe all public arenas, unless one does so in extremely vague terms.Furthermore, the use of these examples becomes less powerful when one factors in the wider context of how people in the nineteenth century spent their time. Life in the 19th century existed at a much slower pace than life in the 1980s, one of many reasons why it is unsurprising that people had more patience for lengthy, complex discourse.

Chapter 5 Quotes

The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has moved on to describe a pivotal moment in the history of communications: the invention of the telegraph. He describes the effect of the telegraph on American culture as "a three-pronged attack" that made discourse more irrelevant, impotent, and incoherent.

This is a somewhat surprising statement; usually, we might think of the direct and concise messages transmitted via telegraph as being more relevant, potent, and (perhaps) coherent than, for example, a long letter that does not arrive until weeks or months after it is sent. However, Postman challenges this assumption, suggesting that conveying information immediately and concisely perhaps does not have an advantageous effect on communications at all. In his view, the ease with which mass media is produced and disseminated *decreases* the quality of the messages conveyed.

To the telegraph, intelligence meant knowing of lots of things, not knowing about them...

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has argued that the invention of the telegraph turned information into a commodity, which people consume without truly processing. In today's world, Postman contends that people "consume" vast amounts of news but that it does not affect their actions, making news irrelevant even while it is more ubiquitous than ever. This passage critiques the fact that, since the invention of the telegraph, "intelligence meant knowing of lots of things" but never engaging with information in a substantial, sophisticated way. While this is a powerful point, Postman seems to be addressing issues of globalization much broader than communications technology alone.

In an increasingly interconnected world, what responsibilities *do*we have to "know of lots of things," even if they are remote from our own experience? Postman's assumption that it is better to know moreabout fewer topics is plausible, but perhaps better suited to a time in which people could afford to be informed only about their immediate surroundings. Finally, this passage clearly takes on a whole different meaning in the age of the internet.

Many people today approach the issue of broad versus deep understandings of the world by asking how valuable it is to have vast general knowledge when almost all of this knowledge is a quick Google search away.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ At the end, one could only applaud those performances, which is what a good television program always aims to achieve; that is to say, applause, not reflection.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has emphasized the difference between television and the literature of the past, claiming that the format of television has created a constant demand for entertainment. In Postman's view, entertainment is fundamentally oppositional to rational thought. In this passage, he states that the purpose of "a good television program" is to elicit "applause" rather than "reflection." Although this coheres with much criticism of the way in which people "mindlessly" consume television, there are a few flaws in Postman's argument. It might seem pedantic to point out that viewers watching television at home rarely ever actually applaud, but given Postman's emphasis on this issue, it is worth close examination.

To Postman, applause and reflection are inherently opposed, but there is little empirical evidence to support this claim. Long and complex symphonies, operas, and plays are all likely to end with the audience applauding, followed by sophisticated, "rational" discussion of the work being performed. Meanwhile, a family watching television at home are unlikely to applaud, but may discuss the program with one another. Indeed, in many ways television seems the ideal medium for encouraging discussion, considering it is consumed socially (unlike novels) and in the privacy of people's homes (unlike opera). Both these factors make conversing about television much easier and perhaps more common than discussion of other art forms.

❝ Had Irving Berlin changed one word in the title of his celebrated song [There's No Business like Show Business], he would have been as prophetic, albeit more terse, as Aldous Huxley. He need only have written, There's No Business But Show Business.

Related Characters: Aldous Huxley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has emphasized both television's uniqueness among other forms of media and its unparalleled influence on culture. Even thoughts, behaviors, and modes of communication that do not immediately appear related to television are often deeply affected by its influence. In this passage, Postman wryly comments that Irving Berlin's famous song "There's No Business Like Show Business," written in 1946, would have been "prophetic" if the title had been altered to "There's No Business *But* Show Business." The second title highlights the entertainment industry's exceptional status within late 20th-century American culture, as well as the particular power of "show business" to turn all aspects of life into frivolous, flashy forms of entertainment.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has performed a close reading of the phrase "Now... This," arguing that this two-word fragment encapsulates the aggressively shallow and disposable nature of television programming and culture. Furthermore, he has argued that in 1980s America people link credibility with style, meaning that whoever is most superficially appealing is trusted to communicate most accurately. Postman claims that, as a result, "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world." While Postman's critique of the superficiality created by visual culture is valid, following this critique with such a sweeping and unsupported claim about how informed American are somewhat undermines his original argument.

Although Postman points to major problems in the way that television affects people's judgment and taste, entertainment culture is nonetheless only one of many factors that contribute to the extent to which a given

population is well-informed. Other issues include education, social customs, and public accessibility of institutions such as libraries and museums. Furthermore, Postman's exclusive focus on the Western world should not be dismissed lightly. Note that this book was written in the twilight years of the Soviet Union, and thus government censorship of information was still the major factor preventing large parts of the world from accessing knowledge.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Postman has claimed that television is the enemy of capitalism, a surprising statement that he roots in the example of television commercials. In this passage he argues that television is problematic for capitalism because television commercials focus on "the character of the consumers of products" rather than the products themselves. This observation is one of the most prescient points in the book, and coheres with much contemporary theory about advertising. Cultural critics today are quick to identify the ways in which contemporary advertisements attempt to sell a "lifestyle" (or in other words, a "character") rather than any specific product. This is why it is often difficult to determine what many commercials are for until the every end.

However, as critics today point out, this ambiguity is far from antithetical to capitalism––indeed, it is a key feature of the capitalist moment in which we live (often referred to as "late capitalism"). Many theorists reason that advertisers have discovered that it is more powerful to sell a personality or lifestyle to audiences than an individual item, especially given the fact that contemporary consumers have such a vast array of commodities at their fingertips.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ We now know that "Sesame Street" encourages children to love school only if school is like "Sesame Street."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Postman turns his attention to a potential objection to his argument, born in the example of educational programming. He identifies *Sesame Street* as an example of a television program with education as its primary focus. However, Postman views *Sesame Street*as deeply flawed as a vehicle for transmitting knowledge and critical thinking skills to children. The problem, as Postman illustrates in this passage, is that when children receive educational messages in the form of entertainment, they will expect all education and knowledge to be entertaining. Furthermore, this promotes a model of education in which knowledge is *consumed*, as opposed to produced and interrogated through interactions between student and teacher.

In many ways, this is a valid criticism of the popularity of *Sesame Street* and of educational programming in general. However, Postman fails to address the fact that under many historical methods of teaching, education was constructed as a one-sided process of consumption, albeit one that looked very different from *Sesame Street*. In many traditional schooling systems, students were expected to mutely consume, memorize, and regurgitate information without engaging in critical discourse with their teachers. This method of teaching was born out of the absolutist idea that learning should centre around the accumulation of accepted, "correct" facts, ideas, and skills. In many instances, more progressive, discourse-based modes of education have arisen in conjunction with the age of television.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ *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.

Related Characters: Aldous Huxley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's conclusion, Postman emphasizes that television seems nonthreatening and even highly appealing––yet this belies the enormous danger it poses to

society. However, Postman does not suggest that television be "shut down" (indeed, this would be rather too Orwellian a conclusion!). Instead, Postman argues that it will help if people are better informed about the way in which television works, and are thus able to view television culture and its impact on society with a critical eye. In this passage, he explains that the fact that the characters in *Brave New World* were always entertained was not the real problem; instead, the problem lay in the fact that "they did not know what they were laughing about."

Postman proposes that if people acknowledge the effect that television is having on society, then they will be able to understand and resist its influence. Ultimately, Postman is less concerned with how people spend their free time or which forms of art and media are most popular, and more worried about people's continued ability to rationally question the world around them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWARD

Postman begins his book by summarizing George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel *1984*, as well as Aldous Huxley's (also dystopian) 1932 novel *Brave New World*. Postman points out that these authors, though they both imagined a grim future, didn't "prophesy" the same thing. Orwell predicts that we will be oppressed—not just in our actions but in our very thoughts—by the external forces of governmental control. Huxley, on the other hand, imagines a world where our internal weaknesses and desires to be entertained and pleasured drive us to laziness, stupidity, and intellectual incompetence. "In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us." Postman closes his forward with a provocative and slightly enigmatic contention: "This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right."

Postman immediately places this work in a dialogue not with other non-fiction essayists or cultural critics, but instead with two major writers of dystopian fiction. This points to Postman's belief in the power and importance of literature and sustained reading, but it also shows that his book is yet another vision of the future. Though his is not a work of dystopian fiction, it is still a work that (like Huxley's and Orwell's) tries to bring to life a particular vision of the future in order to make a point to its readers. By saying his argument is about the possibility that "Huxley was right," Postman puts his project directly in dialogue with dystopian projections of the future.

CHAPTER 1: THE MEDIUM IS THE METAPHOR

Postman opens this chapter by recounting various anecdotes illustrating that American thinking has become trivial. Politicians, writes Postman, are praised for their looks or physique. Televised journalism has led to an increasing emphasis on style and appearance. Advertising has preyed on our decreasing attention spans and made us hungry for entertaining quips rather than substantive information and knowledge.

Postman is setting the scene in this early section. Attention span, the dominance of visual culture, and the adverse effects of advertising are all issues he will deal with at length. Part of the project of the book will be to explain (in historical terms) why the current state of culture looks this way.

Postman goes on to acknowledge that this isn't even a groundbreaking set of observations: these worries are quite cliché. But, he contends, we have not adequately accounted for the reason culture is headed in this direction. He maintains that we need to keep in mind the relationship between form and content in public discourse. Without certain forms of media, certain contents would not exist. For example, without technologies of image (photography and television), a politician's or a reporter's appearance simply could not reach a large audience. Thus, conversations about style and appearance would be effectively absent from the dominant cultural discourse.

Postman's first pass at his argument gestures at the two most important points that his book makes: put simply, he first contends that the historical story about media deeply affects our ability to understand our place in an increasingly mediated culture. Second, Postman asserts the fundamental relationship between form and content—arguing that the way something is presented affects what *is presented.*

Here Postman invokes media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who famously argued "the medium is the message." This means that the content of any medium (a book, television show, radio show, or live speech) will be determined by the form of the media that presents it. Postman believes that McLuhan, like Orwell and Huxley, "spoke in the tradition of prophecy." Postman was once a student of McLuhan, and he reassures his reader of his immense respect for McLuhan's thinking, but he proposes a slight alteration to McLuhan's famous argument. The medium, contends Postman, is the *metaphor*. Postman believes that media communicate in ways that are indirect—if media strictly delivered "messages," then people would be better able to see media's importance to culture.

Postman continues to situate his project in a larger context. He notably calls the work of McLuhan, Orwell, and Huxley "prophecy." Once again Postman sees his book as part of a lineage of texts not only about history and the present, but also about the future. What's more, Postman amends McLuhan's "message" to "metaphor" to emphasize that the way the form of media influences its content can be hard to understand. By categorizing media as metaphors, he strategically implies that media need to be interpreted. Postman thus asserts himself as the kind of interpreter (and perhaps "prophet") we need to understand media.

Not only do technological media affect their *own* content, but they also extend their influence outward into the rest of culture, says Postman. Eyeglasses, a technology that improved human sight, are probably in some way to thank for our ambition regarding the human genome project. Eyeglasses told us that the body can be improved through science—gene research is an extension of the same idea. Microscopes told us that there is an invisible, teeming world not accessible to the naked eye, and Postman suggests that psychological insights about the subconscious then grew out of the medium of microscopy. Postman concludes the chapter by saying: "our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture."

Postman paints with broad strokes here. He doesn't mean to suggest that eyeglasses led directly to the microscope, which led directly to psychoanalysis—he simply means to appeal to a kind of intuitive understanding about the complex web of effects that new technologies have on culture. In other words, nothing happens in a vacuum—when new technologies are introduced to mass culture, mass culture will change (sometimes in unexpected ways). Postman's point is deliberately general, and he sets himself up to make his claim more specific in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: MEDIA AS EPISTEMOLOGY

The thesis of this chapter concerns the transition between print culture and television culture in America. Postman believes that, when people got their information from the printing press, cultural conversations were rational, sustained, and logical. Now, he says, under the governance of television, America "has become shriveled and absurd."

This is a claim to which Postman will return repeatedly. McLuhan made a similar point about written culture being rational, and cultures of the image being "primitive." Postman then amends "primitive" to the more negative and condescending "absurd."

Postman begins to support this claim with a discussion of a "tribe in western Africa" whose criminal justice system relies heavily on a judge's memorization of thousands of moral aphorisms or sayings. When a crime is committed, the judge finds an applicable aphorism, and determines a just course of action based on the wisdom of that aphorism. Postman notes that, in an oral culture, aphorisms are an acceptable source of truth or wisdom.

Postman deliberately frames this story about the ambiguous "tribe" to make an analogy. He is beginning to make a point about how media determine our culture, so he starts by describing a culture that uses very different media than 20th century America.

In a print culture like America, however, aphorisms are considered unserious. Postman illustrates this with a hypothetical imagining of a lawyer using aphorisms in a courtroom instead of documented evidence. Because we can print and record ideas, we are not limited by the difficulty of memorization and can therefore rely on much longer texts and accounts to determine truth. If something is written, published, and disseminated, it is more true than if something is simply uttered. Thus, says Postman, media determine our *epistemology* (theory of knowledge, or what distinguishes knowledge from opinion). In other words, our media determine what we consider to "count" as knowledge and truth.

Postman has already told us that new media and technologies have various impacts on culture—but Postman is perhaps most interested in how media influences our conceptions of knowledge. *Postman (we will see) believes intelligence, intellectual seriousness, and rationality are integral to a functional American society. He then connects these virtues to print media, and shows how they are incongruous with visual media.*

Postman says that not all epistemologies, or systems of knowledge and truth, are created equal. He says that in America, print culture is declining in favor of "television-based epistemology." Postman says this shift has resulted in our "getting sillier by the minute." In other words, since media determine what we consider knowledge, and since our intelligence is a function of our knowledge, our collective intelligence as Americans is being (negatively) impacted by a shift from print to television.

Here Postman is explicit about the value system that informs this book. Crudely rendered, this value system says that print culture is rational and therefore good, and television culture is silly and therefore bad. At the time of this book's composition, Postman sees what he believes to be the rising of a new, televised, and consequently absurd kind of culture.

This will be the overarching thesis of the entire book, Postman says. He qualifies his claim by noting that print culture—and its advocators—are not gone. In fact he attributes his own lucidity regarding the effect of media to his continued devotion to printed forms of information. He writes, in an especially figurative moment, "Like the fish who survive a toxic river and the boatmen who sail on it, there still dwell among us those whose sense of things is largely influenced by older and clearer waters."

Postman's work in this section is geared towards establishing his own credibility. He is making an argument about the decline of intellect in contemporary culture: this puts him in the tricky position of someone who, despite being a member of that culture, is still capable of lucid, intelligent observations. Thus he insists that although new forms of media create new (and sillier) kinds of content, it is still possible to resist intellectual decline.

CHAPTER 3: TYPOGRAPHIC AMERICA

Postman discusses the growth of printed book distribution in the 17th century, and specifically its importance to early American colonial culture. "No literary aristocracy emerged in Colonial America," says Postman. He notes that literacy rates varied relatively little between the poor and the rich, and even between men and women, which was particularly unusual in that moment in history. Postman talks about the consequences of such a literate culture and notes that a particularly telling example of Colonial America's literacy is the distribution of Thomas Paine's tract **Common Sense.**

Postman's description of 17th century colonial America is quite nostalgic and idealistic—he renders this period as egalitarian and highly literate. The reader should note that Postman is being strategically selective about his history, deliberately neglecting to discuss the significant percentage of the American population (like slaves and disenfranchised Native Americans) who were not predominantly literate.

Common Sense sold over 100,000 copies in the space of just a few months, and the total copies sold approached 3 million. In 1985, at the time of Postman's writing, a book would have to sell 24 million copies to be said to have done comparably well. Postman derisively notes, "the only communication event that could produce such collective attention in today's America is the Superbowl."

Postman begins to contrast his particular vision of the super-literate colonial past with our present day. The implicit suggestion here is that our love of football and advertising has replaced our love of reason, language, and learning. Postman uses Common Sense's past popularity as a symbol of the decline of print culture, but its title is also an apt representation of what else Postman feels we have lost in a TV culture: our common sense.

"As America moved into the nineteenth century," Postman continues, "it did so as a fully print-based culture in all of its regions." Literature, newspapers, and pamphlets were ubiquitous. Intellectual, popular, working-class, aristocratic—all spheres of culture revolved around print media in their own way. "When Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, his reception equaled the adulation we offer today to television stars, quarter- backs, and Michael Jackson."

Postman continues this strategy, suggesting that as our tastes have changed, so have our heroes. The Charles Dickenses of the world have been replaced by the Michael Jacksons—and Postman, of course, assumes that we will judge Jackson as inferior. The implied question here is: could Charles Dickens have existed in the 20th century the way he did in the 19th?

Postman notes that even lectures—spoken words—took on the quality of print. 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.

New forms of media don't merely affect what kinds of people become popular heroes, but also how individuals think and process. Postman argues that our very speech patterns were different when we were a print culture. We were not only better readers and writers—we were better thinkers.

Postman furthers his argument: The reason the content of culture was so sophisticated at that time is that printed information had a kind of monopoly. If you wanted to exchange ideas, you did so in a pamphlet, a debate forum, or a lecture—all places where the form of printed language lent itself to a more sophisticated and elegant content. Postman says it is important to continue to investigate how the printing press shaped colonial American epistemology, in order to address the problem of the decline (according to Postman) of rational conversation in 20th century America.

Postman emphasizes that we must first understand the past if we are to understand the present. This is a historical argument above all else: in the tradition of McLuhan, Postman believes that a history of media forms is also a history of humanity, culture, and even methods of thinking..

CHAPTER 4: THE TYPOGRAPHIC MIND

Postman recounts to his reader the debates that took place between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in August 1858. Douglas spoke for one hour, then Lincoln replied for an hour and a half—and this was one of their shortest debates. Postman wonders "What kind of audience was this?" He marvels at the ability of Lincoln and Douglas's audience to sit through hours of oratory from people who were not even, at the time, officially presidential candidates. Postman is confident that contemporary audiences could never give their time and attention the way then-audiences did.

Postman continues to ask rhetorical questions that put the present in conversation with the past. His contention is not only that contemporary audiences do not engage in sustained speaking and listening, but also that they couldn't even if they wanted to. Media don't simply affect our practices, but also our ability to practice.

Postman also analyzes the speech of Lincoln during the debate. Postman quotes a particularly long and logically complex sentence from Lincoln, and notes that contemporary politicians are far less likely to speak like this—either because they can't, or because they are wary of being incomprehensible. People of television culture, says Postman, need "plain language." This sets us apart in a fundamental way from 19th century Americans, for whom "the use of language as a means of complex argument was an important, pleasurable and common form of discoursein almost every public arena."

Postman points out that values which today seem obvious and natural to us—like valuing a politician's ability to "speak plainly"—are in fact only recent cultural trends, and contingent upon the rise of television culture. Postman wants us to see how our value systems have changed: we cannot imagine a politician today being praised for reciting his logically complex argument in a public arena—but this has not always been the case.

Postman then says it is important to remember that the written word "has a content" that is semantic and paraphraseable. He notes that this may sound odd or obvious, but contends that it is important to his argument. The fact that writing has a paraphraseable content means that it inherently *asks* to be understood: to be worked through and grappled with by its audience. This is why Postman calls the language of print "serious business." It is, according to him, fundamentally rational. "It is no accident," he writes, "That the Age of Reason coincided with print culture."

This is one of Postman's most central—and perhaps most controversial—points. He argues here that printed language is inherently rational because it has a paraphraseable content. This implies that television does not have a paraphraseable content, and therefore it is inherently non-rational. Today's culture is "silly" because television itself *is inescapably silly.*

Postman then extrapolates that great men of the past—thinkers, orators, politicians, intellectuals—were required to be well-versed and logical, and their audiences were required to do the work of understanding printed language. He notes that great preachers of the 18th and 19th centuries were all men who were exceedingly well-versed in scripture, and whose appeal grew out of their refined intellect. He compares this to the contemporary, commodified "megachurch" figures whose zealotry is often precisely anti-intellectual.

Postman begins diving into examples to prove this point. His first example concerns how we practice religion: whereas (in Postman's view) scripture used to be a tool for rational understanding, now it is a tool for non-rational entertainment. Religion is a place where we can see intellect being replaced by something less "serious," and thus where the influence of new visual media is made apparent.

Postman then shifts his attention to advertising. As with all other spheres of culture, advertising was more serious in the age of reason than it is in contemporary culture. "Advertising was, as Stephen Douglas said in another context, intended to appeal to understanding, not to passions." But Postman argues that with the decline of print culture, it was no longer safe for advertisers to assume the rationality of their audience. Instead, they had to appeal to emotion, psychology, and aesthetic sensibility—reason was left by the wayside.

Advertising is not often thought of as a serious intellectual business, and today we assume it to be on the same level as light entertainment and amusement. However, Postman points out that once upon a time advertising was *considered rational and serious. Thus entertainment is not an inherent part of advertising—it is in fact a new development related to the rise of television culture.*

Postman moves into a more in-depth discussion of contemporary "image culture." He says that once upon a time, citizens would have associated the names of great thinkers with their prose style or handwriting. But now that technologies of image have proliferated, we associate the names of thinkers and politicians—like Einstein or John F. Kennedy—with images of their face, either in a photograph or on a television screen. This, Postman opines, is the replacement of print culture by television or image culture. We can't remember the rational content of a person's work—we only think of their image.

Similarly, in today's world we might consider it natural to associate someone's name with a face. Celebrities, politicians, and public figures today exist to us primarily as images. Once again, however, Postman seeks to de-naturalize this way of thinking. In other words, he emphasizes that the association of a politician with an image is a historically new development, and one directly related to a rise of the culture of the image.

Postman continues to lay out reasons why print culture was once so strong. Before electricity, he argues, time for reading was compressed. Whatever daylight a person had to make use of, they would make use of deliberately and with concentration. Reading was done carefully and attentively. There was no such thing as absent-minded reading of perusing, says Postman. Reading and comprehending were always the same thing. But at the end of the nineteenth century, reading was sundered from comprehension, attention span grew shorter, and the "Age of Show Business" began to take shape.

Today it doesn't seem strange for us to speak of "reading carefully" or to refer to someone's "reading comprehension" skills—but Postman again puts this kind of thinking into historical perspective. Reading used to always *mean comprehension—reading used to* always *be "careful." Postman that announces that all these changes can be attributed to the rise of what he finally calls the "Age of Show Business."*

CHAPTER 5: THE PEEK-A-BOO WORLD

Postman opens the chapter with a discussion of how the invention of the telegraph marked a fundamental shift in American culture. "The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence." The telegraph, says Postman, made non-contextualized information acceptable. The telegraph, for the first time (says Postman) made information into a pre-packaged, easily-digestible commodity.

We didn't move directly from print culture to television culture, and because Postman believes that understanding media requires understanding a history of its development, he now tracks what he sees as the major milestones in the movement away from print culture and towards a culture of the image.

What's more, since the telegraph defeated the problem of disseminating information across vast spaces, it also introduced geographically irrelevant (in Postman's understanding) information into cultural dialogue. He says that "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."

Postman's underlying assumption in this section is that information about events geographically remote from us does not have real relevance to our lives. Our culture today, however, has only gotten more global since the time of Postman's writing. This doesn't make his claim obsolete, but instead should inspire us to consider how new advances in technology and travel have affected how we handle the global sharing of information

Postman turns a question on his reader, wondering how many times the news he or she consumes daily impels them to any kind of action that they would not have otherwise taken. This rhetorical question then launches a new critique of image culture: information is no longer delivered in the service of any action. We absorb the news every day, but the information is impotent, says Postman, because it has no effect outside of capturing our attention for a short time. Postman says this problem is predicted by the telegraph, for, "to the telegraph, intelligence meant knowing of lots of things, not knowing about them."

We might also look more closely at Postman's working definition of "relevant." What makes information "relevant" to a person is its power to enable direct action. Postman contends that information that is about regions remote from us does not enable action. The question, then, must be: is this still true today? With the Internet, we are certainly overloaded with potential knowledge about every possible thing, but it could also be argued that this knowledge allows us to effect more *change than was formerly possible.*

Postman moves on to a discussion of the photograph. He first notes that etymologically, "Photograph" means "writing with light." He says this is perhaps ironic, given that photography and writing, he will argue, have nothing in common. He claims that photography, on its own, can only deal with concrete particularities. It cannot deal with abstract, remote, internal, or invisible content. What's more, photographs, like the telegraph, isolate information from its context. Nothing outside the frame of the photograph is visible.

Next up in Postman's history of the death of print culture is the photograph, which he says is limited in crucial ways. Photographs, because they are images, can only track things that are immediate, visible, and particular. We cannot take a picture of an abstraction. What's more, photographs amputate content from context: we see what the photograph includes, but everything outside of the frame (everything contextual) is lost. This is, of course, a very narrow viewpoint, however. Postman altogether discounts photography as an art form (something that could *convey abstract or invisible content), and he ignores the fact that in some ways, words are just as metaphorical and detached as photos are in their relationship to abstract concepts.*

Photography would, in Postman's account, end up launching a kind of assault on written language. Postman uses the word "assault" because, as he sees it, photography did not position itself as a *supplement* to language and print, but as a *replacement* of it. Newspapers and advertisers immediately recognized the power of the photograph to captivate audiences. Print started to recede from the front page of the newspaper as front-page photographs grew larger, and advertisers cashed in on public appreciation of pre-packaged, decontextualized images. And thus, "For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing."

Postman sees the photograph as not only different to printed media, but directly (and in fact aggressively) opposed to print media. Postman suggests that humans are naturally drawn to images and sound bites over lengthy printed material, because they are easier to digest and require less mental work. Thus the photograph and the telegraph teamed up to change the face of American discourse, starting most significantly with the newspaper, which quickly became a kind of photographic enterprise.

Postman then argues that the photograph and the telegraph gave each other a pseudo-context. Brief sound bites of language, accompanied by a photographic image, became a popular item of consumption—whether in politics, entertainment, or advertising. But this pseudo-context is only a false refuge of sorts, for a culture "overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence."

When we see text accompanied by a photograph, we assume that they relate to one another. Postman says this is a false sense of context, however, for really we are just seeing decontextualized information being normalized by other decontextualized information.

Print culture was not annihilated in one fell swoop, though, says Postman. "In the novels and stories of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and Hemingway, and even in the columns of the newspaper giants—the Herald Tribune, the Times—prose thrilled with a vibrancy and intensity that delighted ear and eye. But this was exposition's nightingale song, most brilliant and sweet as the singer nears the moment of death." And the problem is certainly intensifying, Postman says. As new generations are born who literally don't know of a life without television, the dominance of television culture is seemingly secured as indelible.

Postman's belief in the importance of literature—and especially fiction—comes through again in this passage, where he not only endorses the writing of great American fiction authors, but also indulges in some literary figurative language himself. Postman's argument is rhetorical as well as historical—he wants to be like Huxley and Orwell not only in his ability to prophesize but also in his ability to write figuratively, it seems.

Postman takes a moment to address a technology that is still in its early stages: the computer. "We are told that we cannot run our businesses, or compile our shopping lists, or keep our checkbooks tidy unless we own a computer. Perhaps some of this is true. But the most important fact about computers and what they mean to our lives is that we learn about all of this from television." Television, says Postman, will remain dominant because it is how we get all of our information. It is our way of knowing about the world.

It's glaringly obvious here that Postman is writing before the age of the internet. Computers will become more and more important, he allows, but television will remain the dominant source of information. It is clear now that Postman's prediction was wrong. But the question remains: what would *Postman say about the internet? How would this new system of information fit into his larger argument?*

Postman wraps up the chapter by noting that the culture of the image, the relentless de-contextualization and irrelevancy that saturates our everyday lives, goes basically unnoticed. In other words, there seems something totally natural about this kind of communication of information. This, contends, Postman, is the most pernicious effect of television culture: to make that which ought to seem strange into something apparently natural. His goal, he says, is to "make the epistemology of television visible again."

Postman reiterates that his book is important because it informs us about a history of media that is crucial to our understanding of our present relationship with media. But this book also teaches us to look at what seems natural and to put it into context as something new and conditional—and therefore changeable.

CHAPTER 6: THE AGE OF SHOW BUSINESS

Postman begins the chapter by dismissing the idea that television could extend or augment the intellectual traditions of other media. He says this is an example of what McLuhan called "rear view mirror thinking," where we attempt to define new technologies by past ones. Postman says definitively that television does *not* extend literary culture, but rather attacks it directly.

As with the photograph, Postman presents television as directly opposed to print culture. There is no way in which they can both be dominant at the same time—we are either a culture of the image or a culture of print.

The claim of this section is that television is not only entertaining, but also responsible for making entertainment the "natural format for the representation of all experience." Postman's claim is that television has made the consumption of entertainment (as opposed to reason or rationality) more important than communication of information. Information, in television culture, is always entertaining.

Postman endeavors to explain why image and print are incompatible. For a print culture, good information is rational, *but for an image culture, good information is* entertaining. *Postman thus implies that "rational" and "entertaining" are fundamentally opposed.*

Postman turns to the example of supposedly "serious" discourse on television: broadcast discussion between great world figures like Henry Kissinger, Elie Wiesel, and others, which have taken place on stations like ABC. But televised discussions, even when they take place between serious people, never have a quality of real seriousness. Because time is so limited and because conversations are interrupted by advertisements, it becomes impossible to have a deeply contextualized discussion. This means that conversations on television rarely build from one point to the next. They rather take the form of various disjointed perspectives delivered in succession. "At the end, one could only applaud those performances, which is what a good television program always aims to achieve; that is to say, applause, not reflection."

Reason and entertainment are fundamentally opposed because, Postman argues, "applause" and "reflection" are inherently contradictory. When we are entertained, we respond with a kind of passive approval, but when we are reasoned with or presented with a rational argument, we respond with active reflection. Once again, however, Postman is selective with his evidence, and doesn't take into account television as an art form—something that might be entertaining, but also would *inspire active reflection. This is understandable, though, as more "highbrow" and complex television programs are still a relatively new phenomenon.*

"Television," Postman says, "is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore—and this is the critical point—how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged." Entertainment doesn't simply prevail on the television screen—it prevails in all other spheres of culture. Americans no longer talk to each other, says Postman, so much as they "entertain each other."

Media, as we already know, don't act in isolation. Just as the invention of eyeglasses contributed indirectly to the development of the microscope, so the rise of television has widespread and proliferating effects on culture and thought itself.

Priests and reverends include rock music in their services, surgical procedures are filmed and narrated for future viewers' pleasure, schoolteachers sing to their students as much as they talk to them, and finally the courtroom is televised. People watch real courtroom proceedings as if they were soap operas. Says Postman, "Had Irving Berlin changed one word in the title of his celebrated song [There's No Business like Show Business], he would have been as prophetic, albeit more terse, as Aldous Huxley. He need only have written, There's No Business But Show Business."

Postman makes a definitive declaration here: television changes all information into entertainment. Even serious businesses, like medicine and law, exist in culture as forms of entertainment. And "Show Business" isn't just confined to television. Every business is now the entertainment business—no major forms of information exchange are exempt from the rules of entertainment.

CHAPTER 7: NOW…THIS

Postman says the phrase for which this chapter is titled should perhaps be considered one of the most troubling in the English language. "Now…this" is often used as a transition between subjects on radio or television broadcasts. Postman says it indicates that what you have just heard has no consequence, and what you are about to hear has no context. Television, however, did not invent what Postman calls the "Now…this" worldview.—Postman hopes to have shown that it has its roots in telegraphy and photography. But television is responsible for putting the "now…this" worldview into its "boldest and most embarrassing form."

Postman takes a phrase that would have been universally recognizable to his audience and performs a kind of "close reading" of it, using it to try and prove the total disregard for context and consequence that has pervaded culture since the rise of television. Not only is television culture different in fundamental ways from print culture, but it is also, in Postman's view, unequivocally worse.

Postman says we live in an age where the most trusted news reporters are the most attractive or well-styled ones. Credibility, he says, has replaced reality as the criteria for truth. If information comes from a credible person, it is accepted as true. (It used to be the case that if information reflected reality, it was accepted as true.)

Postman also opines that credibility, as a very concept, is an artifact of television culture. In Postman's account, people used to make decisions about the truth or falsehood of information solely on the basis of the information itself, paying little attention to the source of the information. This is quite a bold claim, however, and Postman doesn't back it up with any examples.

"The result of all this," Postman says, "is that Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world." Postman says that America is a place of "disinformation." This doesn't mean incorrect information, but rather information that doesn't actually serve to inform—it is too disjointed and decontextualized to do so.

"Disinformation" is the content of entertainment culture. It is not bad because it is incorrect or misleading—it is bad because it doesn't actually contribute to our knowledge and intelligence, but it tricks us into thinking that it does.

"For all his perspicacity, George Orwell would have been stymied by this situation; there is nothing 'Orwellian' about it," Postman says. Huxley, on the other hand, would not be surprised in the least at the current state of affairs in America. The information environment in the US looks to Postman like a game of Trivial Pursuit. Postman says it is uncertain if a nation can survive on 22-minute spurts of information—if it considers the news valuable only when it produces laughs or applause.

Once again turning to dystopian fictions, Postman here wonders gravely about the health and survival of his nation if things continue on as they are. Postman doesn't elaborate on what it means for a nation to "survive," but his tone clearly conveys his worry about America degrading into something unrecognizable. As readers living in his hypothetical future, then, it is up to us to decide how correct Postman might have been in his arguments and predictions.

CHAPTER 8: SHUFFLE OFF TO BETHLEHEM

This chapter concerns the preaching of evangelical pastors. Postman looks in particular at Reverend Terry, Pat Robinson, and Jimmy Swaggart. They are all capable of delivering what Postman calls the "perfect television sermon." They are theatrical, emotional, and comforting. This chapter thus concerns "television's version of religion."

Here Postman returns to an issue he glossed earlier in the book: the absorption of religion by our culture of entertainment. The age of show business has seen the rise of televangelist pastors who are capable of making scripture into entertainment.

Postman claims that religion, like anything else, undergoes a fundamental change when it becomes televised. When we watch a preacher deliver a sermon on television, we are always capable of, at the push of a button, changing the channel or shutting the screen off. Thus a certain kind of secularism hangs over televised religion, as the secular world is only a split second away. Since televised preachers know this, they must make their programming compete with other programming. They offer it at convenient hours, and spice up their sermons with entertainment.

When religion becomes televised, its content is mutated to fit the form of televised media: competitive, convenient, amusing, relaxing, and comforting—these are all traits exhibited by televised sermons. Postman's point in this section is that literally nothing is sacred when it comes to entertainment culture.

This ought to upset us, says Postman, because television has thus turned religion into something that gives us what we *want*, not something that gives us what we *need*. Postman's worry is not that religion is becoming the content of television shows, but that television will become the *content of religion*.

Postman here reiterates what's so dangerous about the encroachment of TV values even in religious spheres—if religion is not safe from being turned into mindless entertainment, then nothing is.

CHAPTER 9: REACH OUT AND ELECT SOMEONE

This chapter begins by suggesting that television is the enemy of capitalism. Capitalism relies on the ability of consumers to choose the product that best addresses their needs. Postman says that "Indeed, we may go this far: 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." Therefore advertising no longer concerns what consumers know about products, but rather what advertisers know about "the market."

Postman here makes a claim that might sound strange to 21st century readers. Postman is writing in the 1980s, when the Cold War is still very much alive in American thinking, and Communism still seems to be a kind of ultimate threat to American ways of life. Thus, by making television the enemy of capitalism, Postman makes an argument that would have held greater rhetorical force for his *readers than for contemporary ones.*

Postman calls television advertisements "instant therapy." In the span of 15 to 20 seconds, the viewer feels as though his or her needs have been addressed—and that feeling is good enough for American consumers raised in the age of show business.

Although Postman considers television to be very damaging, he is careful to acknowledge that it is also thoroughly enjoyable. It may be bad for us to watch television, but it feels good—and this is one of the great dangers of entertainment culture.

Television advertising also has profound effects on politics. Consumers "choose" their politician based on how his appearance on television makes them feel. Slogans and symbols become of central importance. This, for Postman, is a direct result of television culture.

According to Postman, television even threatens our democracy itself. We cannot be informed voters in an entertainment culture, because we are too distracted by images, appearances, and slogans. (This prediction, at least, seems to have been validated by the present.)

What's more, our relationship with our own history has changed since the rise of television. Because television is a medium of instantaneousness and presence, Americans no longer have a sense of themselves as strongly or causally connected to the past.

Postman gives us yet another reason to pay very close attention to his claims about the history of media: because history itself is in fact one of the many things jeopardized by new visual technologies.

This is Orwell's mistake, says Postman: failing to recognize that the government would not be the ones responsible for the restriction of information and the death of free print, but that *citizens* would be. For Orwell, freedom of language and thought was sacred, and needed to be protected from the government. But Postman says that the real threat to free speech and thought is television.

Postman once again engages rhetoric that would have been more effective among a 1980s American audience: the enemy, so to speak, is within us. No one is more capable of restricting our rights to freedom of speech and expression than we ourselves are.

CHAPTER 10: TEACHING AS AN AMUSING ACTIVITY

Postman brings up "educational programming" in this section, beginning with the specific example of "Sesame Street." Sesame Street is education that children love, but it is fundamentally different than school, says Postman. Televisions are not teachers—they cannot be asked questions, and they cannot hold conversations. Postman notes that no education is complete without this social element. If a child can read, write, and count, but cannot converse, question and socialize, then he or she is not properly educated.

Postman here responds to a hypothetical counterargument about the ways in which television can be used to educate, rather than distract. His point is that television cannot be interactive. This is another moment where we should consider the advances in digital technologies since Postman published this book. With the internet, a student can *interact with media or online educators—but it's likely that Postman still would have found this system inferior to a traditional classroom setting.*

People who see television as educational miss the point, says Postman. He contends that all television is educational, but that it educates its viewers in the *ideology of television*. When children learn from a television, they learn only what a television is capable of teaching them: which is the value of disinformation, entertainment, and amusement.

Postman admits that we learn from television, but what *we learn actually contributes to the problem—we learn to seek out entertainment above all else. Thus entertainment culture is self-perpetuating. This is one of Postman's less specific predictions, but it also seems like one of his most accurate.*

CHAPTER 11: THE HUXLEYAN WARNING

"There are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled," Postman says. "In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque." For Orwell, the danger comes from people full of hatred and resentment, while for Huxley, the danger comes from people with a smiling, loving face.

Postman is careful, in his conclusion, to affirm that nothing about television seems threatening on its face. Television is fun, enjoyable, and pleasurable—but Postman wants to emphasize that many cultural dangers appear, as it were, in such disguises. In fact, it is precisely television's charisma that is the problem.

So what is to be done? Postman notes that "Americans will not shut down any part of their technological apparatus, and to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all." Rather, Postman says that media become less dangerous when they are properly understood. He imagines the remedy to this problem is the education of people regarding the power of the medium of television to shape our national discourse. Once we understand what television does, we can be more proactive about promoting other forms of media (like print). After all, says Postman, "*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."

Postman rightly points out that it is unrealistic to ask Americans to avoid or reject new technologies. But Postman does believe we can consciously promote media that help to fight entertainment culture. What might this look like, then? Postman is not specific—he only gestures at a kind of general solution. Have we moved closer to or away from Postman's hypothetical improved future? Are we still in an "Age of Show Business?" These are questions Postman clearly wants to ask future readers.

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