



# *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

## Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business

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By: Neil Postman

### **Book Description (from Amazon)**

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\* This is the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition...originally published in 1985. Only new feature in the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition is a new introduction by Andrew Postman, Neil's son.

**What happens when media and politics become forms of entertainment? As our world begins to look more and more like Orwell's *1984*, Neil's Postman's essential guide to the modern media is more relevant than ever.**

Originally published in 1985, Neil Postman's groundbreaking polemic about the corrosive effects of television on our politics and public discourse has been hailed as a twenty-first-century book published in the twentieth century. Now, with television joined by more sophisticated electronic media—from the Internet to cell phones to DVDs—it has taken on even greater significance. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a prophetic look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment. It is also a blueprint for regaining control of our media, so that they can serve our highest goals.

"A brilliant, powerful, and important book. This is an indictment that Postman has laid down and, so far as I can see, an irrefutable one." —Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World* worth by the yardsticks provided by the left or the right. Instead, we must use an unchanging standard: the pure, unvarnished truth.

### **My Synopsis:**

Mind blown. The scariest part about this book is that it was originally printed in 1985 and this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition only has an added preface to the original text. If you've ever looked around at society and wondered what has happened, this book has the answers. Alas, it doesn't provide a solution to the problems presented within. Unfortunate in a way, but hopeful that a solution is still out there.

## Amusing Ourselves to Death

By Neil Postman

- p. vii Is it really plausible that this book about how TV is turning all public life (education, religion, politics, journalism) into entertainment; how the image is undermining other forms of communication, particularly the written word; and how our bottomless appetite for TV will make content so abundantly available, context be damned, that we'll be overwhelmed by "information glut" until what is truly meaningful is lost and we no longer care what we've lost as long as we're being amused...
- p. xv What happens to use when we become infatuated with and then seduced by them (tech and media)?
- p. xix As he (Aldous Huxley) saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.
- p. 1 **Part 1**
- p. 3 **The Medium is the Metaphor**
- p. 5 When a professor teaches with a sense of humor, people walk away remembering. – Dr. Ruth
- p. 6 ...none of us has the wit to know the whole truth, the time to tell it if we believed we did, or an audience so gullible as to accept it.
- p. 7 ...television gives us a conversation in images, not words.
- p. 8 We attend to fragments of events from all over the world because we have multiple media whose forms are well suited to fragmented conversation.
- p. 9 The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking. Iconography thus became blasphemy...
- p. 10 Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like.
- p. 11 ...the clock made us into time-keeper, and then timesavers, and now time-servers.
- p. 12 Plato knew...writing would bring about a perceptual revolution: a shift from the ear to the eye as an organ of language processing.
- p. 16 **Media as Epistemology**
- p. 16 ...we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant.
- p. 17 Epistemology is a complex and usually opaque subject concerned with the origins and nature of knowledge.
- p. 18 Whatever the original and limited context of its use may have been, a medium has the power to fly far beyond that context into new and unexpected ones.
- p. 20 In our culture, lawyers do not have to be wise; they need to be well briefed.
- p. 22 ...the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression.
- p. 24 ...the decline of print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based epistemology has had grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by the minute.
- p. 24 Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented.
- p. 28 We have reached, I believe, a critical mass in that electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment.
- p. 29 ...every new technology for thinking involves a tradeoff...although not quite in equal measure.

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- p. 30 **Typographic America**
- p. 31 ...that the form in which ideas are expressed affects what those ideas will be.
- p. 33 ...the schooling of the young was understood by the colonists not only as a moral duty but as an intellectual imperative.
- p. 35 ...it was never doubted that such powers of written expression could originate from a common man (Thomas Paine).
- p. 38 ...the invention of firearms equalized the vassal and the noble on a field of battle; the act of printing opened the same resources to the minds of all classes; the post brought knowledge alike to the door of the cottage and to the gate of the palace. – Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835 “Democracy in America”
- p. 40 It is a matter of wonderment...to witness the youthful workmen, the overtired artisan, the worn-out factory girl...rushing...after the toil of the day is over, into the hot atmosphere of a crowded lecture room. – Alfred Bunn, 1853
- p. 40 ...from its beginning until well into the nineteenth century, America was as dominated by the printed word and an oratory based on the printed word as any society we know of.
- p. 41 A society shaped by such men (The Founding Fathers) does not easily move in contrary directions.
- p. 44 **The Typographic Mind**
- p. 44 Those were people who regarded such events (the Lincoln-Douglas debates) as essential to their political education, who took them to be an integral part of their social lives, and who were quite accustomed to extended oratorical performances.
- p. 46 People of a television culture need “plain language” both aurally and visually...
- p. 47 These were important social events as well as rhetorical performances, but this did not trivialize them.
- p. 51 It is no accident that the Age of Reason was coexistent with the growth of a print culture...
- p. 52 The New World offered freedom of religion to all, which implied that no force other than reason itself could be employed to bring light to the unbeliever.
- p. 55 It is sometimes forgotten that the churches in America laid the foundation of our system of higher education.
- p. 56 They believed that democracy, for all of its obvious virtues, posed the danger of releasing an undisciplined individualism.
- p. 60 Advertising was intended to appeal to understanding, not to passions.
- p. 60 By the turn of the century (20<sup>th</sup>) advertisers no longer assumed rationality on the part of their potential customers. Advertising became one part depth psychology, one part aesthetic theory. Reason had to move itself to other arenas.
- p. 61 To attend school meant to learn to read, for without that capacity, one could not participate in the culture’s conversations.
- p. 62 ...it is also true they (writers of the Constitution) assumed that participation in public life required the capacity to negotiate the printed word.
- p. 63 Exposition is a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression.
- p. 63 Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned...the Age of Show Business.

p. 64 **The Peek-a-Boo World**

- p. 65 ...telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information; that is to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity.
- p. 65 The telegraph made information into a commodity, a “thing” that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meanings.
- p. 67 ...telegraphy made relevance irrelevant.
- p. 68 ...most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.
- p. 69 ...a great loop of impotence: The news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer the as more news, about which you can do nothing.
- p. 74 By the end of the nineteenth century...For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing.
- p. 77 ...photography and telegraphy set the key. There was a “language” that denied interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in the place of complexity and coherence.
- p. 78 ...television is the command center of the new epistemology...there is no subject of public interest – politics, news, education, religion, science, sports – that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television.
- p. 80 Television, in other words, is transforming our culture into one vast arena for show business.

p. 81 **Part II**

p. 83 **The Age of Show Business**

- p. 83 ...exactly what Marshall McLuhan used to call “rear-view mirror” thinking: the assumption that a new medium is merely an extension or amplification of an older one; that an automobile, for example, is only a fast horse, or an electric light a powerful candle.
- p. 86 All of this has occurred simultaneously with the decline of America’s moral and political prestige, worldwide.
- p. 87 American television, in other words, is devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment.
- p. 87 ...(television) has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience.
- p. 90 Thinking does not play well on television, a fact that television directors discovered long ago.
- p. 92 ...Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.
- p. 94 ...“Sesame Street” is an expensive illustration of the idea that education is indistinguishable from entertainment.
- p. 97 What all this means is that our culture has moved toward a new way of conducting its business, especially its important business.
- p. 99 **“Now...This”**
- p. 99 The phrase (Now...This) is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously.
- p. 104 We have become so accustomed to its discontinuities that we are no longer struck dumb, as any sane person would be, by a newscaster who having just reported that a nuclear war is inevitable goes on to say that he will be right back after this word from Burger King...

- p. 106 The result of all this is that Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.
- p. 107 ...for in America everyone is entitled to an opinion...It is probably more accurate to call them emotions rather than opinions, which would account for the fact that they change from week to week, as the pollsters tell us.
- p. 110 The fundamental assumption of that world (TV) is not coherence but discontinuity.
- p. 111 (Aldous Huxley) believed that it is far more likely that the Western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion that march into it...
- p. 112 Here is an astonishing tribute to the resonance of television's epistemology: In the age of television, the paragraph is becoming the basic unit of news in print media.
- p. 114 **Shuttle Off to Bethlehem**
- p. 116 Television favors moods of conciliation and is at its best when substance of any kind is muted.
- p. 116 ...on television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment.
- p. 118 ...if the context in which the message is experienced is altogether different from what it was in Jesus' time, we may assume that its social and psychological meaning is different, as well.
- p. 119 ...the television screen itself has a strong bias toward a psychology of secularism. The screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events.
- p. 121 There is no great religious leader who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need.
- p. 124 The danger of mass education is precisely that it may become very entertaining indeed. – Hannah Arendt
- p. 125 **Reach Out and Elect Someone**
- p. 126 If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, charity or honesty but to *appear* as if you are, which is another matter altogether.
- p. 126 The television commercial is the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication to issue forth from the electric plug.
- p. 127 By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial made emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions.
- p. 128 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.
- p. 128 The television commercial has oriented business away from making products of value and toward making consumers feel valuable, which means that the business of business has not become pseudo-therapy. The consumer is a patient assured by psycho-dramas.
- p. 131 ...being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems.
- p. 133 ...television does not reveal who the best man is. In fact, television makes impossible the determination of who is better than whom, if we mean by "better" such things as more capable in negotiation, more imaginative in executive skill, more knowledgeable about international affairs...and so on.
- p. 135 This is the lessons of all great television commercials: they provide a slogan, a symbol or a focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves.
- p. 136 ...just as the television commercial empties itself of authentic product information so that it can do its psychological work, image politics empties itself of authentic political substance of the same reason.

- p. 137 ...the modern mind has grown indifferent to history because history has become useless to it; in other words, it is not obstinacy or ignorance but a sense of irrelevance that leads to the elimination of history. – Carl Schorske
- p. 138 Seemingly benign technologies devoted to providing the populace with a politics of image, instancy and therapy may disappear history just as effectively, perhaps more permanently, and without objection.
- p. 139 The Bill of Rights is largely a prescription for preventing government from restricting the flow of information and ideas. But the Founding Fathers did not foresee that tyranny by government might be superseded by another sort of problem altogether, namely, the corporate state...
- p. 140 ...we have less to fear from government restraints than from television glut; in fact, we have no way of protecting ourselves from information disseminated by corporate America; and that, therefore, the battles for liberty must be fought on different terrains from where they once were.
- p. 141 In America, we are never denied the opportunity to amuse ourselves.
- p. 142 **Teaching as an Amusing Activity**
- p. 142 There could not have been a safer bet when it began in 1969 than that “Sesame Street” would be embraced by children, parents, and education.
- p. 142 Parents embraced Sesame Street” for several reasons:
- ...it assuaged their guilt over the fact that they could not or would not restrict their children’s access to television.
  - ...it appeared to justify allowing a four-or-five-year-old to sit transfixed in front of a television screen for unnatural periods of time.
  - ...Sesame Street relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read.
- p. 144 As a television show, and a good one, “Sesame Street” does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.
- p. 145 One is entirely justified in saying that the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classroom but in the home, in front of the television set, and under the jurisdiction not of school administrators and teachers but of network executives and entertainers.
- p. 145 ...television has by its power to control the tie, attention and cognitive habits of our youth gained the power to control their education
- p. 147 ...three commandments that form the philosophy of the education which television offers.
- Thou shalt have no prerequisites
  - Thou shalt induce no perplexity
  - Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt
- p. 147 ...in doing away with the idea of sequence and continuity in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.
- p. 148 ...television teaching always takes the form of storytelling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music.
- p. 148 The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment.
- p. 152 ...the average television viewer could retain only 20 percent of the information contained in a fictional TV news story.



p. 155 **The Huxleyan Warning**

- p. 155 ...in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate.
- p. 155 ...when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.
- p. 157 It (the Huxleyan future) come as the unintended consequence of a dramatic change in our modes of public conversation. But it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion, and no opposition. Only compliance.
- p. 158 ...there are near insurmountable difficulties for anyone who wishes to end it with some remedies for the affliction. In the first place, not everyone believes a cure is needed, and in the second, there probably isn't any.
- p. 160 We have apparently advanced to the point where we have grasped the idea that a change in the forms, volume, speed and context of information means something, but we have not got any further.
- p. 161 A central thesis of computer technology – that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data – will go unexamined. Until, years from now, when it will be noticed that the massive collection and speed-of-light retrieval of data have been of great value to large-scale organizations but have solved very little of importance to most people and have created at least as many problems for them as they may have solved.
- p. 162 Educators are not unaware of the effects of television on their students.
- p. 163 ...(Huxley) was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.