

Viewpoint: Reflections on Neil Postman’s “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business” (1985) in the context of today’s digital social media platforms

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Abstract

*Recently, fingers have been pointed towards the impacts of social media platforms' algorithms. Although billed as transformative and democratic, most social media platforms are often in the headlines for disseminating “conspiracy theories” and “fake news”. However, the debate on new technology is not new. This viewpoint puts the current debate on social platforms in the context of the historical debate. In it, we firstly provide a comprehensive review of a seminal book by Neil Postman (1985), *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Although published decades ago before the introduction of today’s social media platforms, the book is today a topic du jour. Secondly, we put the analysis from the review in the context of today’s social media proliferations. The originality of this review is that it describes the impact of consuming technology without questioning it and that what we are witnessing is a shift from word-centered typography to image-centered social media. Postman calls this era “the age of exposition”, which gradually intoxicates academia and political discourses, thereby losing seriousness, clarity and value within public discourse.*

Keywords: social media, fake news, word-centered to image-centered, disinformation, Postman

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, new technological developments have not only been hailed as panaceas for their abilities to improve and impact lives but have also been met with withering criticism. History teaches us that the advent of the printing press in the 15th century, the telephone in the 19th century (Casson, 1911), Radio and TV in the 20th century (Smead, 1950), and the world wide web in the 1980s although contributing immensely to societal development, have also been slated in one way or the other. This has been the case in in recent decades with the proliferation of various kinds of digital platforms which has been the subject of academic, industry and policy discussions concerning their merits. While these platforms offer many benefits with widespread diffusion, they are enveloped in imperfections (Zuboff, 2019). For example, the recent proliferations of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, OnlyFans, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter, although billed as transformative and democratic, are often in the headlines for disseminating

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“conspiracy theories” and “fake news” (Khan et al., 2021; Lazer et al., 2018) and thereby intoxicating academic and political discourses. Have we lost seriousness, clarity and value within public discourse? In addition, these platforms have come under scrutiny for a variety of reasons, including negatively impacting our health, contributing to social anxiety (Berryman et al., 2018), and promoting a culture of “famous for being famous” (McMullan et al., 2021).

Recently, fingers have pointed towards the algorithms underlying the social media platforms. For instance, Facebook has been accused of putting profits before safety through filter algorithms designed to increase engagement and fast online visibility. However, the debate on the downside of mass communication channels – although recently energized by social media platforms – is not new. Throughout history, there have been publications, scholarly or otherwise, which were dismissed as merely speculative, works of fiction, and/or dystopic, but which later become magnum opuses. In this viewpoint, we provide a review of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman (1985) in the context of today’s social media platforms, which are, arguably, providing cultural adjustments as the center of a new epistemology regarding modes of thought, methods of learning, and means of expression.

2. Amusing Ourselves: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (1985)

Neil Postman (1931-2003), the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, was a social critic who had written numerous other books on culture, education and media.

The starting point *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* is that there is a tendency to think of new technologies as additive. As consumers of technology, we tend to perceive them as valuable. Indeed, technology is valuable, and its various applications have brought with them unparalleled advantages. However, Postman argues that every new technology is characterized by a “Faustian bargain”: first it giveth, then next it taketh, meaning that, as much as technology offers us several benefits, it also constructs new meanings which may take away other benefits that were earlier perceived as good. To illustrate this point, Postman explores the viewing of television within American society and describes the cultural adjustments to epistemology and how American society thoroughly accepted its *definitions of truth, knowledge and reality*. In fact, Postman states that his book aims to illustrate that “television’s way of knowing is uncompromisingly hostile to typography’s way of knowing”.

In the Foreword of the book, Postman reminds us of the two profound arguments that had been popularized in a world of technology. First, one from George Orwell who, in his dystopic book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, predicted a world run by characters such as Big Brother whose name has today become synonymous with surveillance by totalitarian states and has, more recently, been given potency by the diffusion of ICT. Interestingly, the big brother character has, in recent decades since the publication of Postman’s book, become a syndicated global TV show where ordinary people are casted on TV with cameras following their lives. Second, from Aldous Huxley, who argued in his *Brave New World*, published in 1932, that people would give in to technology far more easily if they *were amused rather than oppressed*. Both books’ realities are woven together in Postman’s take on the consumption of technology, as the advantages of television were at a pace and cost that were unimaginable hostile. People were amused and lost the awareness to read; they gave in far more easily.

3. From word-centered culture to the image-centered and graphic revolution

In chapter 1, "The Medium is the Metaphor", Postman focuses on how television changed the communication discourse in American society. He discusses the decline of the age of typography as a shift from a *word-centered* culture to the rise of *image-centered* television, thereby shifting the content and meaning of public discourse. Postman identifies three significant changes that have impacted how we communicate: the *written alphabet* (undermining oral traditions), the *printing press* (for mass production of messages), and *television* (for its banality). He lays the groundwork of the book by citing Plato and Galileo. First, Plato, who commented that writing would bring about a perceptual revolution, that is, from the ear to the eye as an organ for language processing. Second, Galileo, who stated that the language of nature is written in mathematics. Postman then concludes chapter 1 by arguing in a similar vein that "We don't see nature or intelligence or human motivation or ideology as it is" but only as our languages are. And since language is our media then the media are our metaphors, and our metaphors create our culture.

In chapter 2, Postman describes *media as epistemology*. When TV moved into people's homes it became the command of a new epistemology. Postman argues that this shift set the origins and nature of new knowledge, which evolve with the nature of communication at each point in history. Based on current cultural biases, facts are only believed as truth if dressed in their "proper clothing". Postman argues that public discourse followed the notion that "seeing is believing", whereas reading, deducing and counting, which is also believing, started to decrease incrementally. Moreover, a mature discourse that values concepts, reason, order, objectivity and tolerance, would ultimately be replaced by the Age of Show Business. As television takes place at the center and typography moves to the periphery, analyzing what is being said, picking out lies or gaps in logic or over-generalizations, and comparing ideas would ultimately reduce. Postman calls this era the "*Age of exposition*" due to three factors: the evolving mode of thought, the method of new learning, and new means of expression. In chapters 3 and 4, Postman crafts a historic map from the 16th to the late 19th century on how the printed word monopolized public discourse – in terms of attention and intellect. He argues that Americans became avid readers of books, newspapers and pamphlets. The author cites several public figures, such as Lincoln- Douglas' presidential debates and how they utilized rhetoric for hours, showing the power of typography that controlled the culture. He gives a detailed account on how literacy rates were higher and how they have decreased over time. For example, in 1829 the New York Apprentices' Library housed 10,000 volumes, from which 1,600 apprentices borrowed, and, by 1857, the library served three-quarters of a million. In 1858, crowds would come out to listen to politicians speaking for up to seven hours, drawing on great attention spans. Speakers didn't just use plain language but also relied on literary oratory. Listeners had to have a grasp of issues and their context within history and politics. However, with the introduction of television, communication changed as politicians were selling their ideas on talk shows, where "cosmetics replaced ideology as the field of expertise". Glitzy graphics had already begun to replace gritty war footage in news media to keep viewers' attention on their perky hosts.

In Chapter 5 – The Peek-a-Boo World – Postman begins in the mid-1800s, as the United States started to grow westwards and information moved slowly as it traveled via print. However, Morse Code and the telegraph changed all that as they legitimized context-free information from social or political factors, relying on novelty, interest and curiosity since information could be bought and sold. Speed trumped quality and utility. The flow of information "made relevance irrelevant". The emergence of trivia as knowledge fed the need for crossword puzzles and quiz shows, so now people knew things but not about things. At the same time, more papers started to carry stories based on sensationalism rather than reason. Each headline takes the shape of a slogan that is replaced by another while lacking implications, background or connections. Photography arrived at the same time and reduced moments in time to images without context or syntax. This

set the “graphic revolution”, which replaces language rather than supplementing it, in which facts pop up, entertain, then disappear. When TV came into the media landscape, it polluted public communication and much more due to its emotional power. Despite its benefits, consumers lost seriousness, clarity and value within public discourse. Postman makes a robust case for this theory by pointing to the connectivity of events as a process of technologies that led to the TV moving into people’s homes and taught the viewer about other media, including how we ‘need’ computers to learn and run our businesses and homes. In other words, TV taught us *how* we know the world rather than the library teaching us how to view and think about the world.

The second half of the book starts with (Chapter 6) describing *The Age of Show Business* and how it permeates so many aspects of our lives. The chapter provides examples of how the medium of television attacks literate culture rather than extending it; Postman poses questions such as what is television? What kinds of conversation does it permit? What sort of culture does it produce? To answer these questions, he makes a distinction between a technology and a medium. He suggests that technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Like a brain, technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. Here Postman provides a context on how television has been adopted in America and abroad. In America, television found liberal democracy and enjoyed free market economics, which resulted in American shows being broadcasted worldwide, spreading its culture everywhere else. According to Postman, between 100,000 to 200,000 hours of US television programs were exported abroad. These hours were visually rich, with an average shot length of 3.5 seconds, the viewer was never allowed to rest the eye or the brain. Everything was made entertaining, whether it matters or not, to entice the audience to watch it. Embedded music was everywhere, to elicit the right emotion at the right time. The television “must suppress the content of ideas to accommodate the requirements of visual interest”; Postman provides vivid examples of how the population stopped sharing ideas and started to share images. The population also stopped arguing with propositions and started to argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials. He shows, with examples ranging from priest, presidents, surgeons, lawyers and educators, how they had no duty to satisfy professionalism and discipline, but rather had to conduct their activities to the tune and the demands of good showmanship on the television. Postman concludes the chapter by reminding us that there was no business, only show business.

In chapter 7, Postman uses the phrase “Now...this”, which was used on television and radio to indicate that what one had just seen or heard had no relevance to what was coming next. He suggests that the organization of broadcasting is mapped by speeding electronic media with no meaning and cannot be taken seriously. A new fact is about to be introduced with no relevance to the previous one. In other words, your brain is asked to move on without thinking. Likewise, on-air talent is recruited with the right mix of attractiveness and credibility to reinforce the perception of whether or not the information is confirmed. Postman adds that the “Now...this” world view was an offspring of telegraphy and photography, but nurtured through the television. What preceded and followed is separated in content, context and emotional texture. TV news is presented as a drama, with music and a good-looking cast. The importance of stories is often based on what visuals are available. No one expects consistency in content and tone in TV news, even when it breaks for ads. Postman points out that the population was used to this discontinuity via fragmented headlines and facts, which started with the telegraph. All this damages “our sense of the world as a serious place”. It also generates a so-called anti communication – “a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction”. As a result, other media follow in its wake with large photos and superficial listicles – yet less content. Postman explains how TV is more likely to provide misinformation that leads people away from knowing due to being

misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented and superficial. The author argues that's what happens when you entertain rather than inform. Information is not treated as authentic. The public becomes less interested in reporters pointing out discrepancies unless they are amusing. If they cannot see these logic gaps in others' work, will they notice when they produce illogical or contradictory statements? At this point in the book, he suggests that technology redefines the meaning of "being informed", which he terms as *disinformation*. The result is that Americans would become best entertained and, quite likely, less well informed.

In Chapter 8, Postman dwells on TV evangelists and shows how religion has taken the bait; a chapter he calls "Shuffle off to Bethlehem". The book claims that TV evangelists focus more on humor and brimstone to keep the audience's attention. Everything that made theology, for a believer, to be a historic, profound and sacred experience is stripped away – ritual, dogma, tradition, theology and spiritual transcendence. The shows are not even presented in sacred spaces. Instead, TV sermons are trivial and celebrate affluence and celebrity: "Television's strongest point is that it brings personalities into our hearts, not abstractions into our heads." He questions televised religion, which stripped away the offering of free pamphlets and bibles as gifts for the population to read and instead offered amusement as preachers control the content of their preaching to maximize their ratings. He cites the executive director of the national religious broadcasters' association who said that "you can get your share of the audience only by offering people something they want". He delves into some of the most notable religious figures such as Jesus, Mohammed and Luther, and claims they never offered people what they wanted. But television offers what people want: it is amusing, user friendly, and easy to turn off and on, but also very alluring when it speaks the amusing language of visual imagery, which doesn't demand a lot of thinking or logic from human brains.

In Chapter 9, "Reach Out and Elect Someone", the author explains how TV commercials have affected American voters in the political arena. With examples, he shows that, by the age 40, an average American will have seen over one million commercials. Since the mind is not able to continuously question the ads, the same approach works well for political ads, since who wants to defend complex philosophical ideas to an audience who doesn't question, because voters have already learned not to question the discontinuity of TV ads and news. The next step is an easy one with image politics. One has to believe that every problem is quickly solvable thanks to science, tactics and technology. Before one can challenge that notion, the solution is presented in the political candidate before you. But in reality, politicians don't solve problems with quick fixes. With TV ads, the focus then becomes making that person likeable. Whereas voters once chose the party that represented their economic and social interests, now the focus is on the candidate's personality. Each face becomes a metaphor based on a slogan or an impression. The politics that were meant to be of thought, of reason, and of democracy, the television provides side steps for incompetence. Given this evolution, "political discourse is emptied not only of ideological content but of historical content, as well," Postman explains.

In chapter 10, Postman looks at education. When the children's show *Sesame Street* first aired in 1969, it was embraced by a public already brainwashed into consuming bite-sized ad content presented as entertainment. However, it taught children to expect a school to be equally amusing. After all, the TV-style of learning is hostile to the book learning or rote learning of the past. It is deceiving that the show teaches children their letters and numbers, Postman posits, since it doesn't instruct children on how to learn. "Like the alphabet or the printing press, television has, by its power to control the time, attention and cognitive habits of our youth, gained the power to

control their education.” It has its curriculum – an information system with a purpose to influence, train and cultivate young minds and characters – that drowns out the one taught in schools.

How does TV differ? Each episode or documentary contains a separate lesson without the need to have a prerequisite course for continuity. Lessons are boiled down to avoid complexity so you can enjoy them without having to remember details. And everything is told via a storyline without any hypotheses, reasons or logical arguments. As a result, children are challenged to produce essays or written assignments that feel foreign to their brains. Teachers are required to entertain to hold their students’ attention. Students want drama and visual aids to match their media-saturated brains, yet they don’t retain that information since they are already craving for the next “Now...this.”

In chapter 11, Postman wraps up with a Huxleyan Warning: in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell predicted that culture would become a prison, while Aldous Huxley foretold it as a burlesque show. The smiling face lures us in and convinces us to give up what makes life hard when we just want to be happy. Yet, people comply without resistance or discussion, not understanding what they are ceding. The lessons raised in previous chapters certainly open viewers’ eyes to how they benignly accept what they see without questioning it. We need to watch for the biases presented and consider the information that bombards us. Postman lists 17 questions that delve deeper into those overall themes.

4. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; public discourse in the age of show business and today’s social media proliferations

Neil Postman’s book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, was ahead of its time when we look at the current debate on the phenomenon of social media. Although the empirical focus of the book was on television and its construction of new meanings to American societies, this book provides a good starting point in understanding the impact in today’s social media technologies. Social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, (dis)inform and entertain us. These platforms which are ubiquitous and impact our lives often combine visual images, photography, sound and a form of typography, and viewers can access a myriad of information through a click and more suggestions. Do these social platforms also amuse us to death? Today’s social media platforms maybe argued to involve a Faustian bargain where moral and ethical trading is involved (Barnes, 1999; Dooley, 2021). Given today’s debate on the proliferation of ICT, including the omnipresent debate on fake news, hate speech, misinformation, hacker activities and cyber wars, internet addictions such as gaming, and pornography, could we learn something from Postman’s theory on the epistemology of technology? It may be argued that we are witnessing the same era of “the age of exposition” to social worlds. By reflecting on Postman’s book in the context of today’s social media debate we present four takeaways:

- First, we observe that clicks on the TV remote control have metamorphosed into clicks on the mobile phone and other devices. And as the social media platforms expand, we face the challenge of weighing their utilities and their negative impacts on our lives. For example, according to Ott (2017), Twitter is being tagged as a “simple, impulsive, and uncivil” type of communication. The impact of Twitter and other social media handles can be understood with regard to how data companies’ business models are structured to use algorithms that maximize profits where sometimes safety takes a backseat (Zuboff, 2019).

- Second, Postman's book calls for nuanced understanding of how technology transforms and replaces what we take for granted, and therefore bring new meanings. For example, through a few clicks, without much thinking, we can access (un)useful, (un)truthful and opinionated information which previously took time and effort. An illustration of this would be, for example, the rise of so-called social media influencers, who generally form a type of education that consumers depend on for much of decision making. Additionally, where we see a moral and ethical trading, for example the website called "OnlyFans" that was criticized to host child sexual material with a Pay-Per View (PPV) business model. Consistently, the social media consumption brings new meanings regarding modes of learning, and means of expression where ethics are less attended, could it be that the use of google maps, while providing us with quick directions, might be argued to have decreased our abilities and sensitivities to learn about geography and our mind mapping sensibilities?
- Third, with Postman view, one should be concerned about how social media platforms are being used within organizations; from a Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) perspective, scholars should rethink how social media permeates organizational borders (Vergne, 2020), most importantly, how organizations use social media platforms to gain attention for their products or services. Postman's approach could aid scholars to rethink how technologies are changing the such sections of organizations that management tends to alienate. Earlier scholars have discussed the notion of the "unmanaged parts" in several domains (see e.g. Gabriel, 1995), and it is within such contexts that the side effects of social media are still not fully understood.
- Fourth, rather than focusing on the utility of technologies, scholars could focus on applying Postman's thinking in sections of organizations where automation and content creation for social media has taken a large part in decision making, for example, the process of design that is enabled by AI (Verganti et al., 2020), or the recent forms of transfer of value and investment that is propelled mainly by information systems on social media rather than behavioral economics. For example, blockchain technologies (Fisch, 2019) have created a Faustian bargain between the knowledge of economics and the use of decentralized hype as a tool for investment. The rise of investments in Non-Fungible Tokens (NFT), tokens and crypto-currencies, and similar forms of investment, might have an impact on broader understanding of social value due to automated algorithmic decision-making (Marjanovic et al., 2021). Scholars could also explore the role of AI with regard to transparency and reliability in developing cognitive trust, as recently discussed by Glikson and Woolley (2020). In addition, the way machine learning is transforming our lives (Balasubramanian et al., 2020) has far-reaching implications, and future studies could take this into account. With Postman's thinking and in the context of social media, scholars could seek to investigate what philosophers and social theorists have debated for decades – a phenomenon termed as "organized immaturity" – a condition that arises when individuals deliberately delegate their own independent reasoning to technology (Zuboff, 2019).

In closing, this viewpoint recalls important learning outcomes from Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*; that when new technologies unfold. We comply without resistance or even discussions, since we may not understand what we are ceding. Just as Postman ironically sees TV as one of the best avenues to impart these lessons, we may view social media platforms as the venue for learning the cultural symbols and how to distance ourselves from the influence of such media. Of course, this takes critical thinking skills that need to be learned. As Postman argues, "We ought to look to Huxley, not Orwell, to understand

the threat that technologies and other forms of imagery pose to the foundation of freedom of information". We hope that this viewpoint can offer researchers tangential points to consider in the realm of technology acceptance, and the ability to reflect whether social media is indeed amusing us to death.

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