

This is your brain on  
technology: don  
delillo's white noise



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In DeLillo's *White Noise* the new-found abundance of technology enters into human lives to create constant distractions and background noises. The protagonist, Jack, often refers to the television as the 'voice' from the other room. In the supermarket, the loudspeaker drowns out conversations between shoppers. Technology is seen as a presence and a character that interrupts human life and conversation in the novel, and with the average American family watching 6.12 hours of television daily (Rue), the television in turn disrupts a majority of actual American family lives. When the television set becomes an inanimate, extra family member, its purpose ends up being to capitalize on people's suffering and to draw family members away from each other.

In today's fast-paced culture, there are several distractions that cause distance between family members, and people in general. Especially in a capitalist culture, most people are driven to have the highest education, the most successful career, and the most luxurious goods. With motivations such as these, traditional values such as marriage and family get somewhat swept under the rug, and stress is abundant in everyone's life. When another distraction comes into the family, the television set, even its youngest members are highly affected. Though it is impossible to judge how affected children are by television watching, the fact that they are affected is indisputable. In an article about the role a television plays in a child's life, Richard Fabes argues that the television falls short of what it could achieve: "The potential of television to shape viewers' conceptualizations of family life is also quite strong given the number of television programs that portray families and their interactions" (2). Wholesome television programs do have

the ability to impact viewers; unfortunately, these family sitcoms are not what influence people the most, and they are certainly not what most people remember from watching television.

Anyone who has sat down to watch a local news station can affirm the fact that violence, tragedy, and crime capture an audience's attention. No matter how gruesome the footage, DeLillo confirms that "It's more or less universal, to be fascinated by television disasters[...] If a thing happens on television we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (DeLillo 66). No matter how morbid, tragic, or gory a subject matter is, as long as it is on television, it is fair game for any one to be entertained by it. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a work that describes the media's effect on American society, Neil Postman describes America as "A culture whose information, ideas, and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word" (29). Television is accessible, it informs its audience much quicker than reading the same information could, and it captures a viewer's attention. Unfortunately, the television is not known for being an educational device as much as it is known for consistent images that are violent, sexual, and gory.

Both Postman and DeLillo agree that the overwhelming number of negative images has an effect on viewers. Postman admits that the normal theory behind the television is that its purpose is to captivate, "Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure" (87). With most news programs covering negative events daily, it is no wonder that people look to the atrocities in <https://assignbuster.com/this-is-your-brain-on-technology-don-delillos-white-noise/>

their own communities for entertainment. In general, television viewers not only become desensitized to the horrors portrayed on the TV: they also expect such things to happen in their own communities. As Jack Gladney states about foreign countries, “ They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinkings, et cetera” (DeLillo 66). This American family man cannot even fathom why other countries do not broadcast their tragedies as entertainment to their masses, because he is so used to disasters being shown as entertainment. If what Postman says is true, that “ Television is our culture’s principle mode of knowing about itself” (92) and that television constantly faces criticism for airing horrible violence, then perhaps American culture is to blame, not the television. Either way, the more heinous the footage, the more viewers will be drawn to it. Most people have heard the saying, “ sex sells,” but violence, gore, and tragedy attract a viewing, paying audience as well.

Of course, to those who experienced a tragedy, suffocating, invasive attention from the media is not what they desire. Yet at the same time, the news coverage proves that the victim’s disaster is worth knowing about. After the toxic airborne event in *White Noise*, a man walks around, carrying a television, unable to understand why terrifying experience seems unworthy of airtime:

Shouldn’t the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? Shouldn’t we be yelling out the window ‘ Leave us alone, we’ve been through enough, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion.’ Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site...Even if there hasn’t been a great <https://assignbuster.com/this-is-your-brain-on-technology-don-delillos-white-noise/>

loss of life, don't we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn't fear news?

(DeLillo 155)

Even though this man knows that the reporters would be intruding and capitalizing on their pain, he feels like his distress is not recognized by others. Though there had not been a high death rate from this incident, he and many others at the shelter felt like they had suffered a lot with the confusion of leaving their homes and the uncertainty they face. Without the news reporters there covering their pain, however, the people in the shelter felt like their feelings were not justifiable, which made them even more afraid and angry than the tragedy in itself did. In an essay on *White Noise*, Duvall addresses the lack of coverage on the toxic event: "The awe and terror of this man-made disaster can only be validated through electronic media" (Duvall 436). The people going through this did not necessarily want answers, they wanted attention for the displacement they were enduring.

As the man with the TV in *White Noise* pointed out, news reporters will 'flock to a site' competing with one another to have the best coverage. News programs are ruthlessly money hungry, and their insensitivity towards victims furthers the postmodern idea that capitalism devalues individuals. In America's culture especially, the basis of the economy and everyday life is capitalism, and this holds true for how television programs are run as well. As Duvall blatantly puts it, "Network and cable news programs, competing for a market, operate under capitalism's demand to make it newer, thus turning 'news' into another genre of entertainment" (437). By gaining

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viewers' attention through having the most attractive anchor, the catchiest jingle, and the most convenient air time, news programs are bulking up the money in their pockets, occasionally at the expense of their viewers. Yet, Duvall shows how a television station may not be fully to blame: "As disaster becomes aestheticized, another boundary blurs, that between television news' representation of violence and violence in film, creating a homogenous imagistic space available for consumption" (437). Without American consumerism, the news programs would not be making a profit. Though so many people exhaustively blame television (among other things) as the reason for the deterioration of our culture, they fail to recognize that they are partially to blame for this conspiracy.

The love/hate relationship the characters in *White Noise* feel for the television is partially due to their practically including the idiot box as a family member. As Duvall says, "Throughout the novel, the voice of the television intrudes at odd moments, almost as if the television were a character" (447). It becomes humorous for a reader to notice that the television has obscure and arbitrary outbursts throughout the novel, and continuing with the theme of postmodernism, a reader understands that these interjections are meaningless, and knows not to examine them too much. Incidentally, the amount of information a person takes in subconsciously through the background noise of the television is somewhat shocking, yet it occurs throughout the novel. One of the daughters in *White Noise*, Steffie, even goes as far as reciting 'Toyota Celica' in her sleep, and no doubt she picked this up through the exceedingly numerous commercials that are on the air. In an essay on the effects of television watching on

children, Rice notes that “ Television viewing is so entrenched in American families that it should be regarded as an important socializing influence, comparable to the family, school, church, and other institutions” (Fabes 1). In fact, “ By the time they have graduated from high school, youth have spent more time watching television than any other activity except sleeping” (Fabes 1). Thus, it is incredibly naive to think that children do not learn from and shape their thinking through television watching. Yet again in White Noise the children pick things up from media, when during the airborne toxic event the children experience the symptoms the radio tells them they should be experiencing.

Even a family that communicates well will transition from a socially interactive unit to a viewing audience if a television set is in the room. In an essay on the effects of television on a family, Vincent M. Rue states, “ In the presence of the TV, the family tends to observe behavior that is more parallel, or individual oriented, than interactive” (Walters and Stone qtd. in Rue). When a family subconsciously welcomes a television as a new member, the human family members allow themselves to interact more with the television than with each other. As Jack Gladney points out, “ If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires” (DeLillo 85). The television has become so included in the Gladney family that it seems to know the individuals’ deepest desires. They spend so much time with the television that it appears to know more about them than their fellow family members do. Rue recognizes what happens when you become exceedingly close to your TV: “ Television, in most cases uninvited, has been and is

becoming an 'ever attentive friend' for an increasing number of viewers" (79). When you allow your TV to come into your life so often, it becomes destructive. The television clearly added on to the Gladney family's already present stress, because they stopped communicating with one another and instead turned to their television for ideas, which puts even more strain on the family.

In a novel that both satirizes pop culture and the nuclear family, and is filled with underlying postmodern themes, it only makes sense that the television's role is to portray literal white noise. With its use of fragment sentences and ideas, the television represents the postmodern idea that the world itself is fragmented. Even images occasionally do not make sense, such as when the family saw Babette's image on the TV, and Jack initially worries that she was dead or in turmoil. Though written decades before the present, DeLillo's narrative uncannily portrays American life today. In DeLillo's world as well as the present, family members only relate to each other through communal watching of television, and as Fabes notes, "Families may gather around the set but remain isolated in their experiences, reactions, and attention to it" (2). Even family members in the same room miss out on interacting with one another when they are welcoming entertainment from surreal television programs. Rarely do family members discuss what they just viewed on the television together, so that their entire time spent with one another has been one of passive spectatorship instead of interaction. The television gives families the false hope that they are bonding when viewing together, yet many families do not detect this



delusion. In truth, the television is such a powerful distraction that a family does not even realize the interactions and bonding it is missing out on.

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