

Of postman's amusing ourselves to death | analysis



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Of Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death

Part 1.

"As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

In 1985, Neil Postman published his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. It was a cultural critique, detailing the effects of new technologies on public discourse. In it, he argues television has brought about a fundamental and detrimental change to American culture, epistemology, and communication.

First, how has television changed American culture? Postman writes, at the end of chapter one, "And our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture." He elaborates that our language affects our thoughts and worldview, which in turn determines the content of our speech, which is a medium or "media" of language. Other examples of languages' mediums are painting, writing, and television. Postman then likens these mediums to metaphors. Just as a metaphor presents a comparison between two objects or ideas, a medium allows language to demonstrate the relationship between words and reality. With each new medium, come new metaphors, new relationships between words and reality; with new metaphors, comes new culture. Television has changed our language, and our thoughts, from one of words, coming from the age of typography, to one of images in the "Age of Show Business." Television has changed our metaphors. No longer are we mindful of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness but of our selfish entertainment and banal satisfaction. Our culture has been changed by television. Your worth

was previously based on the value of your ideas and/or contributions to society. Now, the focus is on aesthetic and the arbitrary, creating an intellectually weak and shallow culture.

How has television changed American epistemology? Well, first off, what is epistemology? Postman describes it as, “ concerned with the origins and nature of knowledge.”

American epistemology has traditionally been print-based, that is to say, most knowledge was found in print. The merits of this Postman enumerates: learning stringent control of your body and mind, becoming an efficient and effective reader, developing discernment between logic and emotion, improving memory, and fostering conceptual thinking. Though the merits of a television-based epistemology, he seems to find lacking. He states, “ American television, in other words, is devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment.” Everything on television is filtered through this lens of entertainment. News outlets present the news, not for your information but for your enjoyment. This desensitizes us to the seriousness of certain knowledge. How often are we saddened at the report of a death? How indifferent are we to all the sexual misconduct presented to us? Postman puts it perfectly, “ One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights.” Television entertainment corrupts politics, e. g. the celebrity politician or president. It corrupts religion, e. g. “ We believe in God for a brand-new Falcon 7X (*a 54-million-dollar jet!*) so we can go anywhere in the world, one-stop,” (word in italics added) – Jesse Duplantis, Televangelist (Wootson, 2018), and it reaches our education, e. g. Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Sesame <https://assignbuster.com/of-postmans-amusing-ourselves-to-death-analysis/>

Street. It seems safe to say, our epistemology is severely lacking when our politicians, ministers, and educators begin to put entertainment over their actual jobs.

How has television changed communication? With the advent of the telegraph, radio, and television there was an increase in how much and how fast you could get information. Instead of knowing the local news, what was relevant to you, you could now know what was happening across the nation. Postman asserts you cannot use this information; it's irrelevant to you. It's impotent. Information achieves its importance and potency from what can be done about it. So, television has made communication irrelevant and impotent but also, incoherent. With all the information pouring into us all the time, not all of it is related or equal. Individuals do not have the time or often energy to sift through it all, leaving that information fragmented. Discourse in the age of typography was relevant, potent, and coherent, but it was also meaningful, there was a purpose behind it. It was useful instead of being useless. This shows, that television has only hindered the progress of our communication and not helped it.

Part 2.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* Chapter 8, Neil Postman writes, "I am aware of the deep concern among 'established' Protestant religions about the tendency toward refashioning Protestant services so that they are more televisable." Today, a more current application of this statement may say that Protestant religions tend toward refashioning Protestant services so that they are more up to date with the culture. A good example of this happened

last September 17, Union Seminary sent out a tweet which showed students confessing to plants (Brown, 2019). This was done out of reverence for climate change. In this chapter, Postman mentions because television does favor entertainment, in televised ministry, the preacher takes the spotlight and “ God comes out as second banana.” This example does not tie specifically to television, but it does tie to social media and pop culture. When Christians attempt to appeal to social media, there must be care taken to make sure we do not take center stage. If Christians try to keep Christianity “ current” and are not careful, they could compromise on doctrine or fall into heresy, like the poor souls at Union Seminary. To pray to plants is pantheistic. They are not holy (Limbaugh, 2019). Postman may be right in saying that Christianity is not compatible with new forms of communication, at least not easily compatible.

Disastrous changes in American culture, knowledge, and communication have come about with the advent of the television. In the change of values from typography to television, it has sullied our views and discourse on politics, religion, education, and more. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* has helped many people see the problems plaguing our society, and whether they read it 34 years ago or today, it holds just as much truth now, if not more, as it did then.

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