

# Amusing Ourselves to Death

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death, Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman shows that Aldous Huxley's fear in *Brave New World* has already begun in America of 1985. Entertainment has affected all public discourse, and people do not care if their communication has lost all meaning as long as they are being amused. Postman intends "to show that a great-media metaphor shift has taken place in America, with the result that the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense" (16). He argues that the shift from print to television has affected the entire public discourse with the result that "we are people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death" (3).

In Part One, Postman shows how the medium used in a discourse influences our epistemology. First, he argues that the form of a medium shapes what type of discourse this media produces. Postman recognizes his debt to McLuhan's saying, "the medium is the message" (8). As an example, Postman says that one cannot do philosophy using the primitive technology of smoke signals. He explains how "new techniques of communication bring a transformation of thinking, which then transforms culture" (13). Thus, television has brought a new way of thinking which does not enable intelligent conversation, because its nature produces only entertainment. Second, to warrant his argument, Postman analyzes the American mind before the influence of television, showing that it was of greater intelligence than it is now, because it was shaped by a print-based culture. He surveys the rise and progress of the printing press from Colonial America to 19th century America which became a fully "print-based culture" (38). Postman explains that for two centuries America's culture was dominated by a "public discourse which took its form from the products of the printing press" (63). Printing was the primary medium used by the media. Unfortunately, now America has produced "a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed world" (28). This creates an epistemology "not only inferior to a print-based epistemology, but it is dangerous and absurdist" (27). Under the Age of the printing press, discourse in America was coherent, serious and rational, while under the Age of the television, it has become absurd and shriveled. Postman gives more examples to show respectively how the political, religious, judicial, and advertising discourse was expressed through print, which creates a typographic mind that is rational, coherent, serious, analytical, ordered, and logical. This was the "Age of Exposition." Unfortunately, the telegraph and photography, as Postman argues, gave rise to an incoherent sort of discourse, a disembodied type of information which people used for entertainment, not knowing what else to do with this superabundance of irrelevant information. Furthermore, television changed the entire public discourse and this type of language became our epistemology and our culture. Thus in Part Two, Postman focuses his critique on this new medium.

In Part Two, Postman tries to demonstrate that the epistemology of television is hostile to the typographic way of knowing. It is incoherent and trivial because it has transformed the entire culture into a vast arena for Show Business. Because the medium promotes entertainment, the medium itself is the root of the problem. As a result, "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world" (106). Postman uses the "Now . . . this" expression used by news anchors to show how the news moves from one subject to another without any context – television has decontextualized information. This provides a fragmented and incoherent worldview where facts are used for entertainment, not for information. Again, he gives examples from religion, health care, education, law, transportation, and politics to show how they have been shaped by television to become a source of entertainment. He states, "Our priests and presidents, our surgeons and lawyers, our educators and newscasters need worry less about satisfying the demands of their discipline than the demands of good showmanship" (98). Religion has negatively been affected by television. Having a service on television takes away the sacredness of religion and turns it into a source of entertainment. The political arena has been polluted by television commercials. The political discourse changed to adapt itself to the form of discourse that television requires, which is entertainment. Furthermore, education is now expected to be a place "where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities" (148). Overall, he concludes that the entire culture has become a burlesque (155). America has moved from a printed world to a television world which is sovereign in every sphere of society, which gives "the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future" (156). He tries to give some alternatives. While recognizing that to