

Book Review and Evaluation
of
Neil Postman
Amusing Ourselves to Death:
Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business
(Methuen, London, 1985)

From twenty years ago, and the other side of the Atlantic, Postman offers a stimulating and cogent, if incomplete, picture of the bankruptcy of our public life.

Postman argues that television has transformed culture into one vast arena for show business, that all public affairs have been turned into a form of entertainment. Public discourse has been trivialised and we risk amusing ourselves to death.

Postman's thesis is built upon the contention that the forms of expression available in a culture shape its contents. Thus, the largely visual media of television has led to a downgrading of the verbal and, for example, the political image manager has eclipsed the speech writer (p7).

The first part of the book charts the movement from a typographic to a television culture. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Postman argues, American culture was print-based and characterised by reason and exposition; discourse was predominantly serious, logical, ordered and rational. The development of the telegraph, with the free transfer of information, introduced irrelevance, impotence and incoherence to public discourse. Context free information no longer served a purpose in social or political decision making or action but was reduced to novelty, interest and curiosity. The other crucial influence was the development of photography, which necessarily atomises the world, focussing only on concrete particular representations of objects, rather than concepts or narratives.

Postman characterises the effects of the telegraph, photograph, radio and film:

“Together, this ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world – a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child’s game of peek-a-boo, entirely self contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining.” (p79)

Television is much less amenable to argument than the written word:

“The single most important fact about television is that people watch it, which is why it is called “*television*”.... It is in the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business.” (p94)

Postman’s central claim, then, is that television has tended to transform all subject matter and every area of public life into entertainment. He says:

“The nature of its [our culture’s] discourse is changing as the demarcation lines between what is show business and what is not becomes harder to see with each passing day. Our priests and presidents, surgeons and lawyers, our educators and newscasters need worry less about satisfying the demands of their discipline than the demands of good showmanship. Had Irving Berlin changed one word of his celebrated song, he would have been as prophetic, albeit more terse, as Aldous Huxley. He need only have written, *There’s No Business But Show Business.*” (p100)

Chapters 7 to 10 examine television depictions of and impacts upon news, religion, politics and education respectively.

The chapter on news is especially significant since television has won the status of what Postman calls a meta-medium (p79f) and is now our main way of knowing about ways of

knowing about the world. He comments that: "... television is the paradigm for our conception of public information.... television has achieved the power to define the form in which the news must come, and it has also defined how we shall respond to it." The total information environment begins to mirror television (p113).

Postman's chapter on religion contains some suggestive reflections on the second commandment (the prohibition of image-making) and the tendency of the television to idolatry (p125), but on the whole it is weak. Postman's attachment to sacred space (p121) and his notion that religion is about enchantment (p124) are problematic.

Postman concludes by warning that we are in danger of Huxley's *Brave New World*. Postman's observation that "Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours." (p160) has added resonance in the light of the iconic reality TV show of that name, which epitomises much of Postman's vision of a culture destroyed by entertainment.

It should be pointed out that Postman concedes that: "I do not say categorically that it is impossible to use television as a carrier of coherent language or thought in process." (p93). His general case seems compelling, even if television sometimes rises above itself.

Postman's analysis is sometimes quite specific to the American context. Arguably the New England settlers' commitment to the written word of the bible (p33) compared to the less thoroughgoing impact of the Reformation at large in England allow for a starker narrative than would be appropriate for the British situation. There are some contemporary differences too: Postman's description of the hegemony of the television commercial or advert, for example, is less obviously applicable in the UK situation, where public service broadcasting is stronger. Nevertheless, the main contours of Postman's description would seem to fit the UK landscape too, even if the erosion here was a little slower in coming.

Two decades on, many of Postman's observations continue to appear relevant; some are even prophetic. The verdict of history is unlikely to be on his side, however, when he says: "I believe the computer to be a vastly overrated technology." (p166) The striking emergence and rise of the internet over the last twenty years certainly calls for comment. To some extent the internet represents a resurgence of the written word, but the problems of a glut of irrelevant information, which Postman identifies (pp2, 144), apply to the internet even more strongly than to television.

Postman's hope in education alone seems misplaced. The death of our culture ultimately requires a more profound analysis and a more powerful solution than Postman is able to offer (Romans 1-3).