

**The Postman Always Rings True:  
*Amusing Ourselves to Death After Thirty Years***

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Though the Cold War continued to rage, in 1985 the United States had reason for self-congratulation. The most famous dystopian novel, which directly warned of the danger to the United States and the world should the Soviet Union successfully carry out its plans for world domination, was named *1984*. George Orwell's dire vision had haunted the collective conscious of America since its publication in 1948, but the year 1984 came and went without *1984* being realized in the United States or Western Europe. It would take another decade before the danger appeared to pass permanently and the Cold War declared over; nevertheless, the year 1985 served as a symbolic milestone of victory for the West. Into this triumphant fray, however, stepped a social gadfly named Neil Postman.

In 1985, Neil Postman, a successful author and professor at New York University, was perhaps best known for his writings on the American educational system;<sup>1</sup> however, he was about to publish what would become his most renowned book. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* would popularize a field of thought now known primarily as "media ecology" and would poke significant holes in that heady American triumphalism enjoyed in 1985. In *Amusing*, Postman began by acknowledging the relief Americans rightly felt at avoiding the horrors of the Orwellian nightmare, but reminded Americans that another dystopian novel had been written about the same time. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* had also made dire predictions about the West's future, but as Postman noted

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<sup>1</sup> Postman had published several works with Charles Weingartner on education as well as some of his own. His best known works in 1985 were probably *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (with Weingartner) and *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (alone).

“in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history.”<sup>2</sup> Postman continued saying that

what Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, when Postman surveyed the American scene in 1985, he saw a country that had indeed successfully avoided the dire fate described in *1984*, but sadly one that had succumbed to the equally dire predictions of *Brave New World*.<sup>4</sup> *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was a warning to the American people “about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.”<sup>5</sup>

To Postman, the reason that Huxley’s depressing vision had come true was primarily due to television’s rise to cultural transcendence in the United States. Postman argued that there were three communication revolutions in human history whose impacts were frequently unrecognized but could hardly be overstated: the shift from an oral to a written culture around the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.; the move from writing to print in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; and then the move from print to image which occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from the writings of Marshall McLuhan,

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley published his novel *Brave New World* in 1932 and a collection of essays entitled *Brave New World Revisited: Further Thoughts on the Future* in 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, viii.

<sup>6</sup> Postman, 145. Postman’s more detailed account is well worth considering:

America is, in fact, the leading case in point of what may be thought of as the third great crisis of Western education. The first occurred in the fifth century B.C., when Athens underwent a change from an oral culture to an alphabet-writing culture. To understand what this meant, we must read Plato. The second occurred in the sixteenth century, when Europe underwent a radical transformation as a result of the printing press. To understand what this meant, we must read John Locke. The third is happening now, in

Postman argued that all mediums, rather than neutral tools that merely convey information in different ways, have strengths and weaknesses that ultimately determine content and philosophy. Thereby, the medium becomes the message and determines the very nature of a culture. As Postman argued, “The clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation.”<sup>7</sup> As such, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was “an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television.”<sup>8</sup>

Many then and now reject out of hand the notion that technologies can become the message, but even a basic consideration of mediums reveals Postman’s insight. Postman used smoke signals as an easy example, noting for instance that it does not matter how insightful a philosopher might be, if he opts to use smoke signals to convey his message, everything of value will be lost in translation.<sup>9</sup> Postman readily admitted that television is not smoke signals; nevertheless, its dependence on images controls both content and reception and moves both into shallow water. For instance, while the mere process of reading demands patience and reasoned thought, television encourages passive absorption. In print, authors may use words to parse the subtleties of complex subjects while on the screen, amusing fast-moving pictures reign supreme.<sup>10</sup> As Postman explained:

A major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content—in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling. I will say once again that I am no relativist in this matter, and that I believe the

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America, as a result of the electronic revolution, particularly the invention of television. To understand what this means, we must read Marshall McLuhan.

<sup>7</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 25-27.

epistemology created by television not only is inferior to a print-based epistemology but is dangerous and absurdist.<sup>11</sup>

To Postman the way to understand a culture was to attend to its forms of communication. For Postman, the United States in the twentieth century sowed the intellectual wind with television and was now beginning to reap a cerebral whirlwind.

As some might misunderstand, the whirlwind that concerned Postman was not a standard lament on the cultural filth or artistic garbage that is regularly broadcast over airwaves. For Postman, television is the *least* dangerous when it is broadcasting obviously trivial material. It is when viewers think that television can be serious and valuable that Postman fears the most. In other words, if given the choice, Postman would rather viewers watch *The Bachelor* than *CNN*, for one is not likely to mistake *The Bachelor* for something serious or valuable. Postman's position is that the nature of television limits it to trivial, amusing, superficial images and that Americans' failure to recognize this fact has trivialized the entire culture and has exposed Americans to easy manipulation and patterns of slipshod thought. He developed and arguably proved this position by considering three crucial branches of American society: politics, education, and religion.

### **Television and Politics**

*"We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."*

-- Henry David Thoreau  
(quoted by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 65.

Columnist Alisa Solomon argues in a commentary written for *Fortune* magazine that, in the twenty-first century, “voting is treated with the gravity of clicking on a Facebook “like” button, and much of the purported political coverage of the campaign prefers smackdown-style theatrics to real consideration of the issues....”<sup>13</sup> With these lines, Solomon documents the radical change in governance and citizenship that Postman argued was established decades before. For Postman, understanding the shift in American politics and the power of medium to create shifts was best exemplified by contrasting the laborious and detailed debates held for hours by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, which catered to a typographic culture, as compared to the sound-bite campaigns so familiar to Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since arguably the first televised debates featuring John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, politicians and electorate alike have realized that a telegenic face may well trump any other qualification for office. And, one wonders along with Postman if past political giants such as Lincoln or William Howard Taft would be electable in contemporary times, since their appearances would likely not play well on TV.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, when considering the “news,” Postman reminded readers that daily “news” did not exist before the telegraph’s invention in the 1840s.<sup>15</sup> Teaming quickly with the press, the telegraph made, according to Postman, “a three-pronged attack on typography’s definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence.”<sup>16</sup> Before, information travelled no faster than a horse could run and was thereby filtered for significance and relevance. Citizens logically knew a great deal about the local goings-on that they could

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<sup>13</sup> Alisa Solomon, “Donald Trump’s SNL hosting gig is a new low in the U.S. politics,” *Fortune*, October 31, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/10/31/donald-trump-hosting-snl-u-s-politics/>.

<sup>14</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 64 – 72.

<sup>16</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 65.

directly affect, but far less about far-flung happenings disconnected from their daily lives. Such limitations allowed for depth of knowledge and time to reflect thoughtfully on actually significant events. In contrast, speed of light technologies demand that viewers “know” many things (as long as they can be put in image form) but at a very superficial level. In other words, citizens in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are bombarded with information, but this information is irrelevant to their lives, is about events that they are impotent to affect, and is presented to them in an incoherent and indeed schizophrenic manner.

Considering television specifically, Postman emphasized that, in the United States, broadcasting follows a business model. Television networks exist to make money so they must attract customers. Consequently, every show on television is specifically designed to attract viewers. Such a mindset means that television producers cannot focus on what viewers should know or might benefit from, but what viewers want—it is simply too easy for the viewer to change the channel. When considering the news, a powerful and dangerous incentive thereby exists to pander to an audience rather than inform it. Furthermore, in having to hold an audience, producers must cater to the medium’s strengths and avoid its weaknesses. Obviously this first means news will focus on the visually sensational and available. Furthermore, it will follow the commandments of television broadcasting that Postman identified as: “1) Thou shalt have no prerequisites; 2) Thou shalt induce no perplexity; 3) Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt.”<sup>17</sup>

Considering Postman’s commandments in abbreviated form, one can see both their prominence and danger. In the history of television broadcasting, no one has ever tuned into a show and been told not to watch if they do not possess certain knowledge. Even a “complex”

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<sup>17</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 147-148.

television drama years into its story will begin with a thirty-second summary – “previously on...”—that effectively ensures viewers can easily watch that night’s episode. Such clichés additionally demonstrate Postman’s “no perplexity” second commandment. Postman deliciously demonstrated this reality by noting the lack of Americans’ ability to find the capital of Iran on a map, describe the tenets of Islam, or describe in any detail the governmental structure of Iran despite just coming through over a year of daily news coverage regarding the Iranian Hostage Crisis.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the reality that Americans in the twenty-first century continue to be at a similar loss despite over a decade of Middle East news coverage resulting from the War on Terrorism even more emphatically proves Postman’s point. Finally, in consideration of television’s rejection of exposition, one only need to consider again the contrast between the Lincoln-Douglas debates and televised debates where candidates are asked to give the solution to the challenge of the Middle East in thirty seconds or less and whereafter debate “analysis” tends to revolve around who landed the best “zinger.”

What plays well on television will be played. Postman’s dire warning, then, is that essential knowledge will be left out because it does not fit the medium. But, the danger does not end there. The medium of television gives viewers the illusion of being informed despite its inability to do so. And, perhaps most disturbing of all is the fact that due to television’s dominance, content and character is ultimately changed in order to be in a televisable form. Thereby, as Postman warned, cultures receive new definitions of leadership, citizenship, and truth through the power of the medium.

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<sup>18</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 107.

## **Television and Education**

*As a television show, and a good one, “Sesame Street” does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.<sup>19</sup>*

-- Neil Postman

Postman’s concerns over television’s three commandments worried him most perhaps in the field of education. A curriculum that demands no exposition, complexity, or prerequisites is beyond anything that academia can consider legitimate. And, Postman saw no hope in efforts to make television academic—again, because its form precludes the possibility. As Postman noted, television “educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them. And that is as precisely remote from what a classroom requires of them as reading a book is from watching a stage show.”<sup>20</sup>

The power of television to remake American society’s very understanding of education is perhaps seen best through an example not noted by Postman. One only needs to consider the most frequently heard complaint of a class—that it is *boring*. This criticism is telling because while it is a perfectly reasonable and appropriate complaint for a television show, which exists solely to entertain, it is not legitimate for a classroom whose goal is to educate. A course exists to instruct, so by definition a bad one fails to facilitate learning. Whether a course is entertaining or not is immaterial to its value. In fact, a merely amusing class is by definition a poor one even though it may well be popular. The power of the television medium, however, has so saturated American culture that Americans assume everything should be entertaining and anything failing to be so should be criticized and rejected. Learning, however, requires work and diligence which is infrequently, if ever, amusing. As Postman taught, people who demand that their politicians, teachers, and preachers be first and foremost entertainers are demanding a fundamentally

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<sup>19</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 144.

different thing from their governments, schools, and churches than was ever asked of them before and are thereby losing what was previously provided.

In a further effort to bring dangerous cultural assumptions to light, Postman noted that Americans tend to assume that technology can and should be seamlessly added into school. While Postman would support using a technology to teach a subject if that technology helped, he pointed out that the more common occurrence is to force curriculum to fit a technology which ultimately leads to a deterioration of education. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman observed that “The Voyage of the Mimi,” a popular curriculum of the 1980s that taught students about whales, map-reading, and navigation through television shows played in science classrooms, reflected this fact. Postman argued that

what is of greatest significance about “The Voyage of the Mimi” is that the content selected was obviously chosen because it is eminently *televisable*. Why are these students studying the behavior of humpback whales? How critical is it that the “academic themes” of navigational and map-reading skills be learned? Navigational skills have never been considered an “academic theme” and in fact, seem singularly inappropriate for most students in big cities. Why has it been decided that ‘whales and their environment’ is a subject of such compelling interest that an entire year’s work should be given to it?

I would suggest that “the Voyage of the Mimi” was conceived by someone’s asking the question, What is television good for?, not, What is education good for?<sup>21</sup>

Fast-forwarding to the twenty-first century, teachers are increasingly asked to find uses for game-show buzzers and “smart” classroom screens because schools have invested thousands of dollars in them with the assumption that the latest technology is the greatest technology and automatically should be incorporated into the classroom. As such, Postman’s question of whether decisions are made to serve education or technology continues to haunt the twenty-first century.

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<sup>21</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 152-153.

## Television and Religion

*I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.*<sup>22</sup>

-- Neil Postman

In his chapter titled “Shuffle Off to Bethlehem,” Postman boldly analyzed the sensitive topic of religion in order to demonstrate the all-encompassing power of television. As his book focuses on the United States, his main critique centers on Christianity. This attention is especially appropriate for the Bible remarks in both the Old and New Testaments on the significance of medium. Such notable instances include the Second Commandment where God directs his people on how He will and will not be represented and in the first lines of the Gospel of John where Jesus declared “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”(John 1:1 NIV).<sup>23</sup>

Postman came to two primary conclusions of particular significance on television’s impact on American Christianity. As he wrote, the “first is that on television, religion like everything else is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound, and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence.”<sup>24</sup>

While Postman knew that television preachers, whom he clearly had little respect for, do not

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<sup>22</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 9. Postman draws special attention to the Second Commandment in the opening pages of his first chapter. He writes:

In studying the Bible as a young man, I found intimations of the idea that forms of media favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture. I refer specifically to the Decalogue, the Second Commandment of which prohibits the Israelites from making concrete images of anything. ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth.’ I wondered then, as so many others have, as to why the God of these people would have included instructions on how they were to symbolize, or not symbolize, their experience. It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.*

<sup>24</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 117.

intend and do not believe that they are undermining their faith, he argued that their assessment rests on a dangerous, though not surprising, naiveté. Postman stated:

Most Americans, including preachers, have difficulty accepting the truth, if they think about it at all, that not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another. It is naïve to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value....Though it may be un-American to say it, not everything is *televisable*.<sup>25</sup>

While Billy Graham and Pat Robertson and perhaps the majority of American Christians firmly believe that the very power of television is evidence enough that it needs to be harnessed for the cause of Christ, Postman warns it simply is not possible to do so.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Postman's second conclusion is that the reason religion is presented on television as entertainment is not due to the "deficiencies of these electronic preachers" but due to the nature of the medium itself.<sup>27</sup> As argued so many times before, Postman maintained that mediums have messages built into their very nature and function. Content creators may indeed have very different intentions, but ultimately these good intentions do not matter.

The holy plans of television preachers do not matter because in contrast with the sacred space easily provided by a church, cathedral, mosque, or synagogue, the television is located in the comforts and banalities of one's own home. The overly familiar television is certainly no sacred relic and its content is associated with entertainment on demand, catering to one's personal tastes and wishes. Likewise, the television demands no silence or reverence, and one can enter and exit according to whim. As Postman put it, people "will eat, talk, go to the bathroom, do push-ups or any of the things they are accustomed to doing in the presence of an

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<sup>25</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 117-118.

<sup>26</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 118. Postman quotes both Billy Graham and Pat Robertson strongly supporting the use of television for evangelism. One example is Pat Robertson stating, 'To say that the church shouldn't be involved with television is utter folly. The needs are the same, the message is the same, but the delivery can change.... It would be folly for the church not to get involved with the most formative force in America.'

<sup>27</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 117.

animated television screen. If an audience is not immersed in an aura of mystery and symbolic otherworldliness, then it is unlikely that it can call forth the state of mind required for a nontrivial religious experience.”<sup>28</sup> Postman further built his case by noting the television itself “has a strong bias toward a psychology of secularism. The screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds, that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events.”<sup>29</sup>

For Postman and for religious believers of any stripe attempting to convert the television to evangelistic mission, the primary problem presented by all of this is not even that the evangelistic efforts attempted through the medium will not be effective, but that the demands of television—that content be entertaining, easy, and self-centered—will become the demands of church congregants. As Postman described it, “The danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows but that television shows may become the content of religion.”<sup>30</sup> Commercial television gives people what they want and helps establish a consumer culture that expects to receive what it wants. There, however, “is no great religious leader—from Buddha to Moses to Jesus to Mohammed to Luther—who offered people what they want. Only what they need.”<sup>31</sup> The structure of the television and the demands of faith are naturally at odds, and it would seem the increasing secularization of American society along with the increasingly entertainment-styled church offerings of twenty-first century American Christianity would only strengthen Postman’s analysis.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 121.

<sup>32</sup> For evidence of the growing secularism of American society, see the Pew Research Center’s extensive 2015 survey and analysis on American religious belief. For a documentation and analysis of Christian churches in America embracing an entertainment model, see Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe’s collection of essays titled *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture*.

## Conclusion:

*In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us.  
Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.*<sup>33</sup>

-- Neil Postman

Neil Postman concluded *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by noting several possible remedies to the problems he documented. The most obvious solution was naturally to have Americans simply throw out their televisions. Postman knew, however, that this would not be done. In fact, he stated that in practical terms “to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Postman saw no efficacy in demand for “better” television for as he explained, television is at its most benign when its content is schlock of unmistakable persuasion. “Serious” television frightened Postman most and he consequently maintained that everyone would “be better off if television got worse, not better.”<sup>35</sup> Postman concluded then that the problem “does not reside in *what* people watch. The problem is in *that* we watch. The solution must be found in *how* we watch.”<sup>36</sup>

To the end of changing how Americans watch television, Postman reserved a scant four pages of his conclusion, though to be fair it is hard to read his skilled critique of the television medium without being more thoughtful in one’s own viewing habits. His primary hope, however, seemed to be that American education might serve to stem the mindless tide of passive viewing by having courses explain not how to use technology but how technology uses its patrons. In Postman’s last book, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, he argued for widespread technology education in American schools saying:

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<sup>33</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, viii.

<sup>34</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 158.

<sup>35</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 160.

I do *not* mean by technology education teaching our youth how to use computers. Forty-five million Americans have already figured out how to use computers without any help whatsoever from the schools. If the schools do nothing about this in the next ten years, everyone will know how to use computers. But what they will *not* know, as none of us did about everything from automobiles to movies to television, is what are the psychological, social, and political effects of new technologies. And that is a subject that ought to be central in schools.... If we want our students to live intelligently in a technological society, I don't see how this can be done if they are ignorant of the full meaning and context of technological change.<sup>37</sup>

Postman's hope for technology education, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels, has, however, gone unfulfilled. To be sure, thousands of schools across the country dutifully require children to attend classes on technology, but they are almost solely of the "how to use it" variety and not on how it is using them.

At the collegiate level things appear little better. Here, Postman's name certainly serves to encapsulate a host of arguments with which the intelligentsia is most often familiar but not particularly concerned. The field of "media ecology" has gained a foothold in the academy, but its lessons and Postman's warnings appear to be safely set aside in their own corners of the ivory tower but certainly not in ones required for all students to explore. In 1973, Christine Nystrom defined media ecologists and ecology this way:

Media ecologists know, generally, what it is they are interested in—the interactions of communications media, technology, technique, and processes with human feeling, thought, value, and behavior—and they know, too, the kinds of questions about those interactions they are concerned to ask. But media ecologists do not, as yet, have a coherent framework in which to organize their subject matter or their questions. Media ecology is, in short, a preparadigmatic science.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 170-171.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Nystrom, "Towards a Science of Media Ecology: The Formulation of Integrated Conceptual Paradigms for the Study of Human Communication Systems," (Doctoral Diss., New York University, 1973), quoted in Lance Strate, Christine Nystrom, and Neil Postman, "What is Media Ecology?" *Media Ecology Association*.  
[http://www.media-ecology.org/media\\_ecology/index.html](http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/index.html).

Somewhat sadly, despite the work of Postman and others, this definition of media ecology's operating status is still maintained by the Media Ecology Association's web site over forty years after it was written, indicating perhaps that media ecologists still lack a coherent framework with which to organize.

Postman's death in 2003 ended his personal avocation for media ecology and also stopped him from witnessing the full onslaught of the computer revolution which many might assume invalidates Postman's critique of television, since the computer has arguably replaced it as the dominant medium in American culture. It is doubtful, however, that Postman would agree with any such assessments, as smart phones and social media seem to have merely sped up the culture's abandonment of typographic discourse for a dumbed-down visual one.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the most recent studies of youth behavior reveal the disturbing fact that the typical American young person spends nine hours a day absorbing media and despite the rise of computers, television remains the dominant form.<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of what one thinks of computers and their resemblance or difference with television, it does not ultimately impact Postman's most important warning and the lesson Americans seemingly refuse to learn—namely, that

to be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple. Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation. Introduce the

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* has been the most popular work to present the scientific confirmation of Neil Postman's philosophic arguments applied to computers and smart phones. Other prominent works would include: *The Tyranny of Email*; *The Dumbest Generation*, and *Distraction*. For key works in media ecology more broadly, the Media Ecology Association maintains a helpful web site that includes a list of important works in the field. That list can be accessed directly here: [http://www.media-ecology.org/media\\_ecology/readinglist.html](http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/readinglist.html).

<sup>40</sup> David Bauder, "Teens Spend an Average of 9 Hours a Day with Media." *The Seattle Times*, November 2, 2015. <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/teens-spend-an-average-of-9-hours-a-day-with-media/>.

alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history and religion. Introduce the printing press with movable type and you do the same. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerilla resistance. Here is ideology, pure if not serene. Here is ideology without words, and all the more powerful for their absence. All that is required to make it stick is a population that devoutly believes in the inevitability of progress. And in this sense, all Americans are Marxists, for we believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement.<sup>41</sup>

With these insightful words, Postman, without marking it, returned to his brilliant introduction. And, while Postman's initial analysis suggested that Americans had avoided *1984* but fell into the lesser known trap of *Brave New World*, his concluding words suggest the actual results might be even worse: Seemingly, twenty-first century Americans have failed to avoid either dystopia but instead managed to combine frightful elements of both nightmarish worlds. May Postman and his warnings then disturb the collective sleep.

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<sup>41</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 157 – 158.

## Appendix One: Why do They Hate Us?

As noted in the main text, in Chapter Five of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman uses the words of Henry David Thoreau to emphasize the point that just because a technology allows communication does not mean that anything of value will be communicated. Revisiting Thoreau's quote—"We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate...."—will allow an additional point to be made regarding the power of a medium to remake society.

Postman wrote:

Thoreau, as it turned out, was precisely correct. He grasped that the telegraph would create its own definition of discourse; that it would not only permit but insist upon a conversation between Maine and Texas; and that it would require the content of that conversation to be different from what a Typographic Man was accustomed to.<sup>42</sup>

Note here that Postman observes that a conversation was not only permitted between Maine and Texas but was *insisted* upon. Now, while Postman's concern (and Thoreau's) was that this conversation is likely to be trivial, when one considers that Maine's and Texas' forced conversation would take only fifteen short years to turn into the bloodiest event in America's history, the concern over the conversation takes a more ominous tone. Events are multi-causal so the suggestion here is not that the telegraph caused the Civil War or that the war would not have taken place if the telegraph had not been invented. Communication technology, however, "shrinks" the world while space frequently provides a buffer of peace. Likewise, while conversations can be productive and beneficial, they are not always so. Forced conversations especially can quickly turn to arguments and fighting.

As the United States has hurtled down the road of using ever more powerful and pervasive forms of communication, American culture continually slams into other cultures. And,

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<sup>42</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 65.

if Americans are honest, the vanguard of American culture is frequently its worst parts. Popular movies, music, Internet videos, and pornography can hardly be considered putting Western culture's best foot forward, yet these are the things that dominate airwaves and computer terminals. The nature of modern technologies make them hard to block or censor and so the "conversation" American culture is having with others tends to be entirely one-sided and carried out with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Not surprisingly then, other cultures look to defend themselves and to even strike back.

On the heels of 9/11, Americans frequently asked, "Why do they hate us?" but generally could not find satisfactory answers. Might at least a partial answer be that people around the world have grown increasingly desperate to resist the American cultural imperialism being carried out, perhaps even innocently, through modern communication technology? It is not a question that Postman officially raised, but his work certainly suggests it is perhaps wise to at least consider the possibility.

## Appendix Two: American Culture vs. the Family

In Postman's ninth chapter, he outlined the impact that television has had specifically on modern American politics. While doing so, however, he made several bold assertions regarding American culture's position toward the family. Postman writes that

to understand how image politics works on television, we may use as an entry point the well-known commercial from which this chapter takes the first half of its title. I refer to the Bell Telephone romances, created by Mr. Steve Horn, in which we are urged to "Reach Out and Touch Someone." The "someone" is usually a relative who lives in Denver or Los Angeles or Atlanta—in any case, very far from where we are, and who, in a good year, we will be lucky to see on Thanksgiving Day. The "someone" used to play a daily and vital role in our lives; that is to say, used to be a member of the family. Though American culture stands vigorously opposed to the idea of family, there nonetheless still exists a residual nag that something essential to our lives is lost when we give it up. Enter Mr. Horn's commercials. These are thirty-second homilies concerned to provide a new definition of intimacy in which the telephone wire will take the place of old-fashioned co-presence. Even further, these commercials intimate a new conception of family cohesion for a nation of kinsmen who have been split asunder by automobiles, jet aircraft and other instruments of family suicide.<sup>43</sup>

This analysis of Postman's echoes the words of Sigmund Freud who wrote that "if there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice."<sup>44</sup> Many prominent thinkers, in other words, have noticed modern technology's impact on the family. What seems particularly daunting about modern technology, however, is the fact that it actually promises to help keep family together while actually undermining even the conception of family. To this point, Freud's words are even more prescient than Postman's. In other words, if telephones, Skype, and jet aircraft did not ease our minds and consciences about being separated from our families, perhaps we would not so frequently choose to be separated in the first place.

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<sup>43</sup> Postman, *Amusing*, 134.

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961), 38-39, quoted in Neil Postman *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 6.

Furthermore, it is worth considering as well that in the quote above, Postman, quite apart from his technological case, felt comfortable stating matter-of-factly that “American culture stands vigorously opposed to the idea of family.” Offering no argument, evidence, or qualification, Postman’s assertion naturally raises the question of whether such a bold off-hand analysis is accurate or fair. Naturally, Americans would reflexively hope not; however, is there also a residual nag that perhaps Postman is on to something regarding American culture even apart from its technological adoptions and sensationalized media culture? The question is haunting enough that Grove City College’s Center for Vision & Values held a conference in 2015 to wrestle for answers to such inquiries, and readers are invited to explore what was suggested and found.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Readers interested in the CVV papers on the family can follow the following link: <http://www.visionandvalues.org/family-matters/>.

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