

Amusing Ourselves to Death
by Neil Postman
Reviewed by Maureen Bradley

“When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when a cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.” (p. 155)

In his oft quoted book, Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman gives an insightful critique of the effects of television. While many are quick to jump on the bandwagon of the evil conspiracy of the liberal, secular humanists who write and produce television shows, Postman shows that the conspirators may just as likely be those who fail to discern that in every source of information medium there are underlying effects. He contends the fundamental issue is not content – Is this show too violent? Is that show educational? – but the medium itself. He explains this concept of “the medium is the message” by showing how the form in which information comes to us will determine the nature of the content communicated. He believes that society is being shaped by the ubiquity of TV, that there is “no poverty so abject that it must forego television.” As politics, science, religion, and education are presented on TV, the understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of TV.

The author claims that we have moved from a print based (reading) society to an image based (television) society. This shift has resulted in a nation of people who have lost their desire and ability to think rationally. Why is this so? What are the biases of reading books? What are the biases of TV?

Postman points out that in order to read one must use a high order of abstract thinking which requires classifying ideas, inference making, reasoning, and following a train of thought. He states “to get meaning without aesthetic distractions you are required to assume an attitude of detachment and objectivity” (p. 25) enabling one to analyze the validity of the statement. Reading has a bias towards “a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity and a tolerance for delayed response” (p. 63). Reading is a slow process thus encouraging patience. When one reads he must sit, concentrate, and interact with the author.

The biases of TV are different. It does not allow for much reflection simply because of its obsession with the instant. TV is a “visual delight, pouring forth thousands of images on any given day. The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests. The eyes always have something new to see. Moreover, television offers viewers a variety

of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification” (p. 86). TV is attention-centered. Its primary goal is to keep the attention of its viewers. It first selects ways to attract interest, allowing content to be shaped accordingly. Thus content is wholly subservient to attention. Due to the brevity of the average program (and commercial), TV encourages simple and immediate solutions to problems and inevitably leads to a disbelief in long term planning, in deferred gratification, and in the need for confronting complexity.

“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” (p. 157). To verify his claim of the negative ramifications on a society that has gone from primarily print based to image based, he gives the example of a debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1854. Douglas began by speaking three hours. As Lincoln rose to speak he reminded his audience that it was then 5 p.m. and since he would speak for at least three hours and Douglas would have one hour after that to respond, perhaps they should break for dinner. Can you imagine modern man standing or sitting for seven hours to listen to political arguments, tightly reasoned, logically expounded, using every form of rhetoric available to convince an audience?

In the chapter “Shuffle Off to Bethlehem” he examines religious television. Postman writes: “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.” Since television’s influence has turned everything into entertainment, we might look to its influence to understand why even in evangelicalism there is this powerful drive away from the serious in the direction of that which entertains. We must have a “sensory feast” and are unable to sit more than 40 minutes (if that long) under a cogent sermon.

Postman reminds us that George Orwell in 1984 and Aldous Huxley in Brave New World did not prophesy the same thing. “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.”

Is this a book that advocates throwing away television? No. We should recognize TV for what it is, entertainment, and use it from that perspective, in moderation. Certainly as Christians we need to assess which mediums are having the most influence on us just by the number of hours we expose ourselves to them. This is an important book for anyone who would understand why we should not be amused by a print-challenged society.