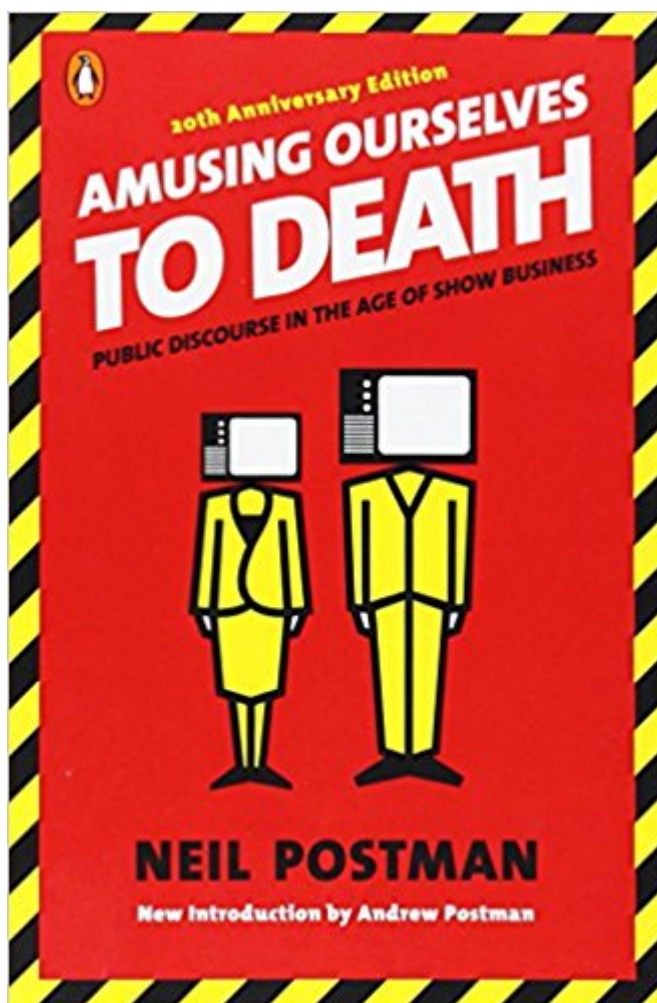


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# Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse In The Age Of Show Business



## Synopsis

What happens when media and politics become forms of entertainment? As our world begins to look more and more like Orwell's 1984, Neil's Postman's essential guide to the modern media is more relevant than ever. "It's unlikely that Trump has ever read *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, but his ascent would not have surprised Postman." Originally published in 1985, Neil Postman's groundbreaking polemic about the corrosive effects of television on our politics and public discourse has been hailed as a twenty-first-century book published in the twentieth century. Now, with television joined by more sophisticated electronic media from the Internet to cell phones to DVDs it has taken on even greater significance. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a prophetic look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment. It is also a blueprint for regaining control of our media, so that they can serve our highest goals. "A brilliant, powerful, and important book. This is an indictment that Postman has laid down and, so far as I can see, an irrefutable one." Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World*

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## Customer Reviews

"I can't think of a more prophetic, more thoughtful, more necessary and yes, more entertaining book about media culture." Victor Navasky, National Book Award-winning author of *The Art of Controversy* "All I can say about Neil Postman's brilliant *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is: Guilty As Charged."

“As a fervent evangelist of the age of Hollywood, I publicly opposed Neil Postman’s dark picture of our media-saturated future. But time has proved Postman right. He accurately foresaw that the young would inherit a frantically all-consuming media culture of glitz, gossip, and greed.”  
—Camille Paglia  
“A brilliant, powerful, and important book. This is an indictment that Postman has laid down and, so far as I can see, an irrefutable one.”  
—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World*

Neil Postman (1931–2003) was chairman of the Department of Communication Arts at New York University and founder of its Media Ecology program. He wrote more than twenty books.

"Amusing Ourselves to Death" is an amazingly written and well-argued book. As Postman notes: In the Victorian Era (mid-late 1800s), novelist Charles Dickens had as much fame as The Beatles in 1960, Michael Jackson in 1980, or Brad Pitt in 2014. The farm boy in the late 1700s carried a pamphlet of Thomas Paine’s writings in his back pocket. Today, school-children carry iPhones with pictures of Eminem (boy) or Taylor Swift (girl). In the mid-1800s, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas debated in public FOR HOURS on the dire issues of their time. Today, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney have bite-sized debates where one side speaks for 1 minute and the other side gets a 30-second rebuttal. Clearly, the people then were different from the people now in terms of mainstream intelligence. The reason, Postman argues, is that the people in Dickens’ era were children of "The Age of Typography," and the people today (us) are the children of "The Age of Show Business," or "The Age of Television." Reading was life to people in the older days; watching television is life to us now. And television, however entertaining, cannot be anything but sheer junk because it works through images, sensationalism, and emotional gratification. Writing, on the other hand, requires patience, detachment, memory, and reason. The result is that we are dumber than our ancestors. Incredulous? Pick up the book and let Postman prove it to you. This book was written in 1985, but don’t be fooled; it still wields enormous relevance today -- The chapter titled, "Peek-a-Boo-World" as well as the "Information-to-action-ratio" theory outlined in it are particularly pertinent regarding the modern-day use of the internet, especially with portable laptops, tablets, and cellphones. With those gadgets, we have become, in short, a nation buried in triviality, as Postman predicted. Furthermore, television viewership today has not decreased with the rise of the internet, iPhones, and such. On the contrary, studies show that we still watch as much television as before, despite the alarmingly rising rate of electronic use. In this book, Postman focuses on politics,

religion, education, and the news. These, he says, are serious topics that are downgraded to mere amusement because television, by design, works by making everything amusing. In effect, we come to expect everything in life to be entertaining when, in actuality, some things must be endured. Again, I urge you to read this book carefully. I've read it four times. Its ideas have allowed me to wean myself away from television and on to typography. Let it have the same effect on you.

Whether we like to admit it or not, technology has made its way into our lives and we will never be the same again. Every human being sees this phrase with eyes of either positivity or negativity. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* addresses the progression of typography to television and how these mediums have influenced our media, politics, and news intake. Neil Postman's 1985 perspective on the reshaping of our culture is insightful, bold, and brutally honest. Postman's writing might seem offensive to some, but in reality, he is striving to tell it as it is. He identifies that we as a culture thrive off of the desire to be entertained. The way we communicate reflects such desires. On page 13 Postman writes: "What I mean to point out here is that the introduction into a culture of a technique such as writing or a clock is not merely an extension of man's power to bind time but a transformation of his way of thinking-and, of course, of the content of his culture. Every detail of our lives is a product of the way we progressively think and respond. He then moves on to what he calls *Media as Epistemology*, referring to the ways we use media to gain or interpret knowledge. He references Frye, Jesus, and Socrates as influential figures who have influenced our understanding of truth. Postman speaks very metaphorically throughout his text, which for some, might make him hard to follow. The book doesn't jump straight into a narrative about television, as the title might suggest. Postman takes about half the book to build up to those thoughts and instead starts out the early chapters with the original uses of the printed word. The slow progression to his main point seems long, but in a lot of ways crucial to the point he is trying to make. An enjoyable result of this book is that instead of simply bashing an entire aspect of our culture, he describes it in detail and points out factual components from beginning to end. From the Age of Exposition to the Age of Show Business, Postman describes the evolution between these stages with great quantities of truth. Weaved throughout his writings, Postman offers warnings and awareness that he hopes for the reader to grasp and understand. On page 113 Postman states: "It has been demonstrated many times that a culture can survive misinformation and false opinion. It has not yet been demonstrated whether a culture can survive if it takes the measure

of the world in twenty-two minutes. Or if the value of its news is determined by the number of laughs it provides. These kind of statements point at the weaknesses of media's role in our society. Postman frequently uses these type of comments to drive his point home. With all of that being said, Postman's statements were truthful, but I felt that the book aired more on the side of negativity. I would have liked to hear him touch on the different positive products of electronics and the impacting changes technology has made on our culture as well. Laced with personal bias I think it's beneficial for Postman to make us more aware, but just not the most supportive of the way he goes about doing it.

In George Orwell's book '1984' (written in 1949) his anxiety was that books would be burnt to avoid 'heresies' being spread among the citizens; earlier (1931) Aldous Huxley had written his 'Brave New World', with its thesis that books would not need to be burnt, because no one would read them - we would be 'amusing ourselves to death'. In 2017 it looks as if Huxley made the better bet. Almost unheard of in the publishing of this sort of book, this "20th anniversary edition" of Neil Postman's enduring and far-sighted analysis was published in 2005. The original was written in 1985 when television was the 'enemy', but it is even more relevant today in the age of Twitter, Facebook and the others.

Amusing Ourselves to Death is the spiritual sequel to Boorstin's The Image. Postman wants us to realize that there is something inherently inferior about the information we consume through visual media. Forget television designed for entertainment - which is at least honest - and focus in something like a news segment. As far as its creators are concerned, the worst thing that it could possibly do is inspire or provoke you, two horrible emotions that risk you getting up and leaving your living room and missing the imminently scheduled set of commercials. The result is the unreality we find ourselves in, one where no one can recall the last time they actually DID anything with the information they were given from the television. You realize that the last thing we have to fear is a malicious Orwellian news industry, because what we have is so much worse: culture incentivized to be as shallow, fabricated and captivating as possible, at the expense of what is actually real or true or meaningful.

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