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## AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH

*Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*  
by Neil Postman, Viking Penguin Inc., New York, N.Y., 1985

We congratulated ourselves in 1984 when Orwell's ominous prophecy of government intrusion, long associated with that year, did not prove true. But we had forgotten Aldous Huxley's equally chilling vision, described in *Brave New World*. Huxley proclaimed that no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their independence, for people would come to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think. In his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman concurs with Huxley's forecast and affirms that the age of television has brought it to pass. "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books," Postman explains: *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 that what we hate will ruin us, Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.*

### *The Medium is the Message*

Postman bases his arguments on the premise that the form of public discourse helps dictate its content. The medium itself classifies, shapes and regulates what we see, and even "argues a case for what the world is like." In the case of smoke signals, for example, the medium at least partially dictated the message; clearly, if only for lack of firewood and blankets, these signals would not have been appropriate for carrying long-range philosophical discussions.

The invention of the printing press heralded the birth of a *print culture*. As the traditions of oral story-telling and epic poetry gradually disappeared, a new mode of thinking took their place: *In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas.* It was no accident that the dominance of print coincided with the Age of Reason. And now television has replaced print as our culture's principle mode of learning about itself. *Therefore, how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged.*

Obviously word-centered and image-centered cultures produce very different modes of thinking. Whereas print media favor logic and rationality, television favors image and entertainment: *It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse. It is that off the screen the same metaphor prevails . . . In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials. For the message of television . . . is not only that all the world is a stage but that the stage is located in Las Vegas, Nevada. Indeed, downtown Las Vegas is the most apt symbol of our national culture and character. We are, then, a people on the verge of "amusing ourselves to death."*

### *America Before the Age of Show Business*

During the late 18th and throughout the 19th centuries, America was a nation of readers:

- In 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold

between 300,000 to 500,000 copies. Proportionately, a book published today would have to sell 24,000,000 copies to be as successful.

- Alexis de Tocqueville and other visitors to America in the 1800s were impressed by Americans' immersion in printed matter and the high level of literacy.
- "When Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, his reception equaled the adulation we offer today to television stars, quarterbacks and Michael Jackson."

### *The Shape of Television Discourse*

The cultural mind-set fostered by television is captured in the TV phrase "now . . . this," used to indicate that what you have just heard or seen has no relevance to what is about to follow—or perhaps to anything else. From moment to moment the audience is bombarded with skewed and dissimilar bits of information. Furthermore, the world as depicted on TV "has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously": *There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly . . . that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, "Now . . . this." The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the previous matter (approximately forty-five seconds) . . . and that you must now give your attention to another fragment of news or a commercial.*

Television is not neutral; it demands something of us. And our culture has contorted itself to fit the requirements of the medium:

- All messages must entertain.
- Make the viewer feel, not think.
- Image is more important than substantive argument.
- Quantity is more important than quality of information.
- Each communication must be able to stand on its own; programs must not require prerequisites.
- Complexity is not allowed. A perplexed or bored watcher will change the channel.
- The theatrical quality of the presentation is more important than an argument's content or logic.

### *Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

Television has shaped our world so gradually that we are now blind to the distortions of the worldview it offers: *The most disturbing consequence of the dominance of television in our culture [is that] the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre. Nor are we fascinated or perplexed by its machinery: We do not tell stories of its wonders. We do not confine our television sets to special rooms. We do not doubt the reality of what we see on television, and are largely unaware of the special angle of vision it affords. And in spite of the enormous amount of time we devote to it, we no longer talk about television itself, but only about what is on television.*

If you doubt that we have molded our national character to fit the agenda of television—

its advertisers, its neon heroes, its highest virtues and most salient vices—consider the following differences between today and the America of the 1800s:

#### Advertising:

- During the 1800s, advertisers attempted to sell their products by *making a claim*, if often a disputable one. Today, advertisers rarely make declarative statements about their product, preferring instead to pair it with an *image*, with a feeling.
- Business has discovered "that the quality and usefulness of their goods are subordinate to the artifice of their display."

#### Politics:

- Political candidates receive support based on appearances and TV sound-bites. *The emergence of the image-manager in the political arena and the concomitant decline of the speech writer attest to the fact that television demands a different kind of content from other media.*
- Today, William Howard Taft, our twenty-seventh president, would not be considered a viable political candidate. The voting television audience would not see beyond his three-hundred-pound image long enough to even consider his politics.
- Neither would Abraham Lincoln—who rarely, if ever, smiled, and was prone to introspection, self-reproach and long bouts of depression—have been well suited for image politics.
- The Lincoln-Douglas debates, each lasting several hours (one as long as seven), were largely a product of their time. It is not coincidence that the electorate was willing to sit through lengthy intellectual discussion, nor that they were able to navigate the maze of complex declarations and counterpoints; they were a people oriented toward and shaped by the written word.
- Contrast the Lincoln-Douglas debates with those held currently. Arguments are limited to five minutes, rebuttals to a minute or two. *In such circumstances, complexity, documentation and logic can play no role, and, indeed, on many occasions syntax itself [is] abandoned entirely. It is no matter. The [candidates are] less concerned with giving arguments than with "giving off" impressions, which is what television does best. Post-debate commentary largely avoids any evaluation of the candidate's ideas, since there [are] none to evaluate. Instead, the analysis focuses on the candidates' style—"how they looked, fixed their gaze, smiled, and delivered one-liners."*

#### Religion:

- The well-known preachers of the previous century were literary men, relying upon logical argument and exposition to convince their audience. Today, instead of soliciting astute or experienced advice, televangelists seek endorsements from those with real clout: sports or show business celebrities.
- Adopting the television mentality, many religious leaders today seem concerned more with the size of their audience than with the content of their message. A Chicago preacher delivers her message with the wit—and with the same

reception—as a comedienne. Another mingles his Gospel radio message with rock-and-roll music. Even Billy Graham can be seen on the air trading jokes about eternity with George Burns.

#### The Print Media:

- *America's newest and highly successful national newspaper, USA Today, is modeled precisely on the format of television. It is sold on the street in receptacles that look like television sets. Its stories are uncommonly short, its design leans heavily on pictures, charts and other graphics, some of them printed in various colors. As a consequence, it has become one of the largest dailies in the United States.*

While our culture's adjustment to the demands of television is not yet complete, it has certainly distorted our collective vision. Even those who attempt to remain independent of the show business mind-set pay the price: *If some of our institutions seem not to fit the template of the times, why, it is they, and not the template, that seem to us disordered and strange.*

#### The Phrase "Serious Television" is a Contradiction in Terms

The answer to these problems, Postman observes, is *not* better television. In fact, he feels that we would be better off if television got worse: *I raise no objection to television's junk. The best things on television are its junk . . . We do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations. The irony here is that this is what intellectuals and critics are constantly urging television to do.*

#### Breaking Television's Spell

A critical analysis of television, demonstrating how it recreates and degrades our conception of the world, *cannot be accomplished on television: In order to command an audience large enough to make a difference, one would have to make the programs vastly amusing, in television style. Thus, the act of criticism itself would . . . be co-opted by television. The parodists would become celebrities, would star in movies, and would end up making television commercials.*

Education, thus, is the only forum left with the chance to break television's heinous spell. To begin with, educators must not continue to look to television for the answers to educational challenges. Indeed, we must rethink the questions. Instead of "How can we use television to control education?" our question ought to be, "How can we use education to control television?"

Regarding television and other pervasive media, Postman feels we must each ask ourselves some hard questions: *What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require?*

Asking the right questions is enough, believes Postman; it's not necessary that we agree on specific answers. For once, if it is dissected and de-mythologized through critical analysis, the spell of television will have been broken.

## MANUFACTURING CONSENT

### The Political Economy of the Mass Media

by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Pantheon, New York, N.Y., 1988

This controversial view into the inner workings of the mass media has been both heralded and denounced. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky propose a startling yet believable model of propaganda that shapes and constrains the mass media—disclaiming objectivity as an illusion and exposing the powerful, invisible arm of the establishment at work.

*Manufacturing Consent* is a study of governmental and corporate use of propaganda in the mass media "as a force in engineering democratic consent by management of public opinion." According to the co-authors, *the "societal purpose" of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises.*

Herman and Chomsky argue that newsworthy items must pass through five successive "filters" in order to get into print or the nightly newscast. As news passes through each successive filter, it is further refined and shaped. The "distilled" or "cleansed" information that remains often reflects the campaigns of any number of special interests, but may or may not reflect the unaltered truth. Therefore, through their purging mechanisms, these five filters set the context of media reporting, fix the premises of discourse, and define newsworthiness. They allow for objectivity only within these constraints. Taken together, they effectively "narrow the range of news that passes through the gates," and determine which stories will become "big news" and which ones will not.

#### The First Filter: Size and Ownership

Only the wealthy have access to ownership of the media, argue the authors. And, moreover, media operations are often connected to major manufacturing corporations. Thus, they function as integral participants in the market system, sharing in the unrelenting corporate focus on profitability. NBC, for example, is owned by General Electric and has a board of directors dominated by corporate and banking executives. The authors suggest that such close corporate ties not only make the media more sensitive to the interests of a wealthy minority but give this wealthy minority the power to push their own, special regulatory tools through Congress.

#### The Second Filter: Advertising

In order for a media source to survive in the modern arena, it must rely on advertising; funds generated through advertising are what keeps the enterprise solvent. Thus, any media outlet is put at a competitive disadvantage—and media are placed at the mercy of their advertisers' good graces.

Herman and Chomsky cite the example of *The London Daily Herald*, which was the largest daily newspaper in post-World War II England.

At the time of its demise, *The Herald* had almost double the readership of *The Times*, the *Financial Times*, and *The Guardian* combined; nevertheless, the newspaper experienced a "progressive strangulation by lack of advertising support," due to its earnest desires to remain a media tool rather than a commercial tool.

Because newspapers cannot survive on revenues from circulation, advertising is the primary source of financial support for most dailies. But there is an inherent conflict of interest in such an arrangement: "With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The advertiser's choices influence media prosperity and survival."

The authors suggest that successful media corporations are primarily interested in attracting an audience with buying power, an audience that will in turn attract advertisers. Hence media content is tailored *not* to the interests or service of customers who might buy the paper, but to the seduction of customers who fit the advertisers' profile—who will buy what the ads want to sell.

#### The Third Filter: Sources

Because most media sources simply cannot afford to keep reporters on hold in every area of the world to await newsworthy events, they must rely on other sources to receive their news. Their primary sources usually consist of wire services and other credible, first-hand newsmen who concentrate their attention around major news hubs (i.e. The Pentagon, The White House, The State Department, major corporate headquarters, etc.). In fact, however, many of these "primary" sources themselves must rely on secondary, often self-serving sources in order to obtain raw news material. Government media sources flagrantly promote their own interests—as do major corporations—while wire services, which to the average citizen appear as disinterested sources, suffer from the same innate bias of information obtained through government and corporate sources. And an end to the cycle of "media-making" is nowhere in sight: "The magnitude of the public-information operations of large government and corporate bureaucracies that constitute the primary news sources is vast and ensures special access to the media."

Herman and Chomsky also discuss the so-called experts employed by the government, corporations, and the media itself to echo and add legitimacy to the wishes of the establishment. "The steady flow of ex-radicals from marginality to media attention shows that we are witnessing a durable method of providing experts who will say what the establishment wants said."

#### The Fourth Filter: Flak and the Enforcers

"Flak" is a term the authors use to refer to any negative response to a media statement or program: "It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action." Flak may come from advertisers, consumers, the

public, or the government, and, Herman and Chomsky contend, often encouraged by special-interest "plaintiff parties"—i.e. the NRA or the Sierra Club, for example—it is used as a prime method of control.

A newspaper that loses its advertisers as a result of its persistence in exposing an uncomfortable topic may quickly find itself in the throes of bankruptcy. Herman and Chomsky cite a classic historical example of governmental flak. During the McCarthy era of the fifties, newspapers that were in any way critical of Senator Joseph McCarthy's efforts to rid the United States of Communists and their influence, were branded "red" and frightened into submission. Herman and Chomsky contend that American papers today have not essentially changed. As arms of the establishment, the media only rarely attack "flak machines"; it doesn't matter whether the flak machine is a liberal or conservative organization, or whether it is anti- or pro- any particular cause. The machines are seen as too powerful, too widespread. "Although the flak machines steadily attack the mass media, the media treat them well. They receive respectful attention, and their propagandistic role and links to a larger corporate program are rarely mentioned or analyzed."

#### **The Fifth Filter: Anti-Communism as a Control Mechanism**

Maintaining the ideology of anti-Communism is a kind of "national religion" underlying all other mechanisms of control; its subsistence "helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy, it can be used against anybody . . ."—regardless of political or ideological persuasion. [*Manufacturing Consent*, written in 1988, pre-dates the fall of the Soviet Empire. Although a post-Cold War ideology has yet to take solid hold, the concept of an underlying "national religion" exerting control over the populace is a central theme of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model.] Propaganda has proven its mind-bending strength, they say, in numerous historical examples from the U.S. and elsewhere: Nazi Germany, for instance, used propaganda to effective and deadly ends.



The second part of *Manufacturing Consent* involves the application of the Herman/Chomsky propaganda model to various world happenings, contrasting hard facts with media accounts of the events. Variations in the quantity as well as the quality of news coverage of different events are strikingly noted.

#### **Applications: Worthy and Unworthy Victims**

In 1984, a Polish priest and outspoken supporter of the Solidarity trade union named Jerzy Popieluszko was kidnapped and murdered by the secret police. In this case the media ensured—through various techniques such as printing graphic pictures of the scene and editorializing on the event to reinforce its senselessness—that it was not only well remembered, but that it shocked and outraged readers. The media, in other words, in an effort to expose the evils of

Communism, made the Popieluszko case a high-profile news item—even as a hundred or so nuns, missionaries and other members of the clergy were being murdered in a strikingly similar manner throughout various Latin American countries. The media, however, gave the Latin American killings only a fraction of the coverage. One reason in the discrepancy could have been that Latin American news sources were lacking; more likely, Herman and Chomsky submit, the American media had no incentive to bring the facts of these priests' murders to public light, and their story faded quickly from the media spotlight. "A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims," the authors write, "whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*."

#### **Inaccurate Portrayals of Third World Elections**

Herman and Chomsky contend that American media support and legitimize U.S. Government exploits in Central America. For instance, successful attempts made by the Nicaraguan government in the 1980s to hold peaceful and democratic elections were snubbed by the media, while the oppressive terrorist regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala received warm praises from newscasters and the press. As the authors put it: "Given the earlier similar performance of the mass media in the cases of U.S.-sponsored elections in the Dominican Republic in 1966 and Vietnam in 1967, we offer the tentative generalization that the U.S. mass media will always find a Third World election sponsored by their own government a step toward democracy, and an election held in a country that their government is busily destabilizing a farce and a sham."

Herman and Chomsky point to signs of unfair and inconsistent media intervention in many inconspicuous places around the globe, the motives for which may not always be immediately evident. Such situations include the KGB-Bulgarian plot to kill the Pope—in which the enemies of NATO were incriminated after the assassin was forced to recant his story—and the Indochinese wars throughout Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—in which "deception, propagandistic journalism, and destruction" were rampant.

Herman and Chomsky are careful to point out that bias within the media is a by-product of a highly complex, market-based system, and not the reflection of a conscious, concerted effort of a few interested individuals nor of any one political party. In concluding their detailed report, they also distinguish the U.S. mass media from the media of propagandistic totalitarian regimes, in which all debate is discouraged. Indeed, independent, autonomous media are important to a free society. However, when the media become puppets of government special-interest groups and powerful corporations, then a change is in order. *In sum, the mass media of the United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion.*

## THE CRY FOR MYTH

by Rollo May, Norton, New York, N.Y., 1990

In *The Cry for Myth*, Rollo May argues that psychoanalysis has usurped the role of myth in Western society. And as our traditional mythologies fade away, May contends, we experience a profound emptiness that is manifested in an increase in cults, drug addictions, and suicides.

The loss of "meaning and significance" which results from the vanishing of myth is not unique to our own culture. As May points out, when the myths of ancient Greece disintegrated in the third and second centuries B.C., the poet Lucretius saw "aching hearts in every home, racked incessantly by pangs the mind was powerless to assuage . . ." And like the ancient Greeks, May suggests, we, too, without a cohesive mythology to help us regulate our "anxiety and excessive guilt feelings," must now endure such pangs.

The absence of myth may be so devastating that some may feel driven to create private mythologies. May points to the autobiographical novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* for a sketch of just such a person. The novel's narrator Deborah, who is battling schizophrenia, invents mythical characters to inhabit her imaginary kingdom of Yr, where she retreats when "terrified or unbearably lonely in the so-called real world." Deborah's therapist understands the pain that has driven her to escape inside the fanciful walls of Yr. While he is away on an extended leave, however, a less experienced therapist treats Deborah confrontationally in an attempt to destroy the delusions. Stripped of her "whole system of gods," Deborah rapidly deteriorates and regresses, finally setting fire to the hospital and behaving "like a human being whose humanity is destroyed." According to May, Deborah's mental breakdown illustrates the powerful influence of myth on the psyche's equilibrium as well as the extent to which a disappearance of myth can profoundly muddle both individuals and societies.

Cults, May notes, are equally illustrative of the chaos that erupts in a culture from which myths have fled. Young people, who feel particularly confused in a society that has "little sense of the present" and "no life-sustaining beliefs, secular or religious," are highly susceptible to the communal spirit and proscribed mythology that cults appear to offer. Tragically, in turning to cults in their desperate "longing for something to fill the vacuum of their lives," these youth suffer catastrophic effects: they often experience a deeper sense of emptiness—especially when they break from the spell of the cult's mythology—that may lead to drug abuse or even suicide.

How, then, can we recover the equilibrium that myth provides? First, according to May, we must realize that myth does not denote "falsehood." We tend to favor the rational over the mythical in Western civilization to the degree, as May points out, that the phrase "only a myth" is deprecatory.

However, throughout history, May posits, there have been two distinct and equally important forms of communication: "rationalistic language," which involves "specific and empirical" thought and discourse that have culminated in formal "logic," and "mythic language," communication which emphasizes "totality rather than specificity," and unites all of life's experiential feelings and spiritual sensations: "conscious and unconscious, historical and present, individual and social . . . the meaning and significance of human life." May insists that "mythic truth," which speaks to the "quintessence of human experience," *transcends* time, while "empirical truth" changes with every new judiciary breeze and with the publication of each new scientific journal.

Before their widespread debunking, myths provided us with a sense of ourselves, of our "roots," as well as a "sense of community" and belonging. Furthermore, myths once served as models for solving individual and cultural crises and to reinforce our moral values by answering questions concerning the mysteries of nature and the "great beyond." In other words, myths bound us together into a harmonious society, a community of allies. Alex Haley in writing his award-winning *Roots*, felt compelled to trace his ancestors in order to "find his own myth," his identity and his place in the world. Without this understanding, he acknowledged, he felt utterly empty.

Mythical stories, passed through family lines, gave parents a method of teaching values to their children and helped each generation develop a sense of heritage and purpose. May contends that in America, a land of immigrants isolated from their cultural roots, we have always had a special need for restorative myths. And it was this need, he argues, that led Americans to embrace the theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, isolated two conflicting types of myth: those of *Eros*, pertaining to love, and those of *Thanatos*, pertaining to death. In Freudian terminology, *Eros* represents "friendship, interdependence, and . . . unity with our fellow men and women" whereas *Thanatos* signifies "illness, fatigue . . . and non-being . . . the forces that tear us apart." Freud concluded that out of the conflict between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, "civilization is wrought." Interestingly, each needs the other to survive: *Eros* alone is "insipid, childish, indeed, as irrelevant as the little boy 'Cupid' . . ." and *Thanatos*, unmitigated by *Eros*, points to "an emptiness beyond even cruelty."

Related to the necessary balance between these two great forces of love and death, is what Freud called the "healing power of myth." For Freud, the "regressive" function of myths brings to the surface of consciousness the "repressed, unconscious, archaic urges, longings, dreads, and other psychic