

## Rolling in the Aisles: Communicating the Word of God in an Image-Dominated Culture

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### **Amusing ourselves to death with distractions**

The view that television and electronic media have been the predominant, and unwelcome, influence in shaping modern American culture has been a hot topic in academic discussion in recent years. This paper focuses on the seminal work of Neil Postman, entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*,<sup>1</sup> as well as exploring the implications of Postman's conclusions for the communication of the Bible to a society influenced by electronic media.

George Orwell<sup>2</sup> and Aldous Huxley<sup>3</sup> in their classic visions of the future saw oppression coming from radically different sources. Orwell envisaged the external oppressor banning books and enforcing control whereas Huxley's *Brave New World* pictured a society in which external oppression is unnecessary because the people themselves come to love that which oppresses them.

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 drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture ...<sup>4</sup>

Huxley also highlighted 'man's almost infinite capacity for distractions'. Postman's work may be helpful for the minister of God's word in teaching God's truth to a (arguably) distractible and distracted people.

### **Television and truth**

Neil Postman's work explores the history of the American mind and argues that changes in media and communication have manifested themselves in news, religion, politics and education. He asserts that television now holds a central place in all aspects of American life and that major areas of culture have subsequently taken a certain shape.

Postman maintains that such shaping is inevitable because of the nature of television. He argues that it conveniently expresses and imports ideas of a certain nature, something that has had a profound effect on all areas of American life:

[This book] ... fixes its attention on ... forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influences on what ideas we can conveniently express.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Viking Penguin, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (Penguin, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> *Brave New World* (Harper Collins, 1932).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture.<sup>5</sup>

Postman illustrates these ideas by describing the place of the news in modern media:

The news of the day is a figment of our technological imagination. It is, quite precisely, a media event. We attend to fragments of events from all over the world because we have multiple media whose forms are well suited to fragmented conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Postman's problem with television is not simply that it produces junk. Postman's critique of television is to do with its attempt to produce serious output because, as the medium is the metaphor, television is ill-equipped to be serious.

I raise no objection to television's junk. The best things on television are its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, 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.<sup>7</sup>

Epistemology (the theory of knowledge and belief) is that with which Postman is ultimately concerned:

The part of [epistemology] that is relevant here is the interest it takes in definitions of truth and the sources from which such definitions come. In particular, I want to show that definitions of truth are derived, at least in part, from the character of the media of communication through which information is conveyed. I want to discuss how media are implicated in our epistemologies.<sup>8</sup>

The discussion that Postman offers is based on the premise that 'the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression.'

Truth does not, and never has, come unadorned. It must appear in its proper clothing or it is not acknowledged, which is a way of saying that the 'truth' is a kind of cultural prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

Postman argues that every culture and every age understands truth in certain forms, although it should be understood that he is not making claims about absolute truth or God's truth at this point. Rather he writes simply about truth in terms of an understanding of culture, of people, of facts, of history and of society (his views on absolute truth are somewhat shrouded). Postman affirms that truth expressed in one cultural medium may be incomprehensible, silly, irrelevant or childish to another culture that is immersed in another medium.

Although the early years of the nation were entirely different, America, according to Postman, is now a culture awash with entertainment and devoid of serious content. He calls this 'the Age of Show Business'. He describes how this 'Age of Show Business' emerged from the 'Age of Exposition' when a radical shift occurred from print-based media to television-based media.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

## The age of exposition and the age of show business

Postman paints a fascinating picture of 18th and 19th century America: 'perhaps the most print-oriented culture ever to have existed.'<sup>10</sup> It seems to have been significantly more so than England, something that is illustrated by literacy rates, which in some colonies at the outset of the 18th century were around 90%, compared to less than 40% for most of England. Postman describes a young America that was not only highly literate, but actively so, reading voraciously and founding significant numbers of printing presses and newspapers as well as grammar schools and universities. America was also full of lecture halls that saw packed audiences listening to the writers, the intellectuals and the humorists of the day.

Epistemologically, America was 'in print'. This has clear implications for the way in which truth and reason were seen. They were viewed logically, linearly, analytically, objectively, and ultimately 'in black and white'.

[The Press] ... worked as a metaphor and an epistemology to create a serious and rational public conversation, from which we have now been so dramatically separated.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate this, Postman describes political campaign speeches, and in particular a debate between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln in 1858, at which Douglas spoke first for one hour, to which Lincoln replied for an hour and half, with a final half hour for Douglas. This was apparently shorter than their previous encounters, one of which, stretching on towards dinner time, prompted a proposal from Lincoln for a recess to enable the audience to return to their homes and come back, refreshed, for the final four hours.

What kind of audience was this? Who were these people who could so cheerfully accommodate themselves to seven hours of oratory?<sup>12</sup>

The answer is that they were ordinary people. These were people who could listen for hours on end, comprehending complex and lengthy sentences with no pictorial back up, and they formed political judgement as a consequence of these long oratorios.

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The Lincoln-Douglas debates belonged to 'the Age of Exposition', where the printed word, the typographic metaphor, ruled. What are the implications for public discourse of a written, or typographic, metaphor?

The written word, and an oratory based upon it, has a content: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content ... much of our discourse today has only a marginal propositional content ... Whenever language is the principal medium of communication – especially language controlled by the rigours of print – an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result ... [written words] have very little to recommend them except as carriers of meaning ... a language centred-discourse ... tends to be both content-laden and serious ... because meaning demands to be understood.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

These observations have important implications for Christians. Christians are dependent on the written word (the Bible) and preaching is carried out on the foundation of this written word. Content, serious content, demanding understanding of the hearer and reader is the bread and butter of gospel ministry.

Claims are made, meaning is communicated, and propositions are put forward. What Postman describes here is familiar and relevant to us. Interestingly, Postman gives Jonathan Edwards as a further example from this period.

His sermons ... were tightly knit and closely reasoned expositions of theological doctrine. Audiences may have been emotionally moved by Edwards' language, but they were, first and foremost, required to understand it.<sup>14</sup>

### **Tele-words and images**

Postman goes on to outline the two developments that ushered in 'the Age of Show Business' and signalled the end of print's monopoly on public discourse: the invention of the telegraph and the invention of the photograph.

(The telegraph) ... gave a whole new meaning to public discourse. Henry David Thoreau ... remarked in Walden that: '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' ... Thoreau ... 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 Typographic Man was accustomed to.<sup>15</sup>

Postman saw this invention as having a great influence upon the development on public discourse:

News from nowhere, addressed to no one in particular, began to criss-cross the nation ... As Thoreau implied, telegraphy made relevance irrelevant [or irrelevance relevant?] ... The telegraph may have made the country into 'one neighbourhood,' but it was a peculiar one, populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other.<sup>16</sup>

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Information became context-free and also implication-free. How often does the news, for example, lead to action on the part of the viewer? With respect to the issues reported, what difference does it make to the receiver? The answer of course is very little.

By generating an abundance of irrelevant information, it dramatically altered what may be called the 'information-action ratio'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

[In the age of telegraphy] everything became everyone's business. For the first time, we were sent information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not permit the right of reply.<sup>18</sup>

It was into this culture that photography and eventually television emerged. The combination of these two media, argues Postman, made possible a massive 'graphic revolution' where seeing, rather than reading, became the basis of believing.

Television has achieved the status of 'meta-medium' – an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of ways of knowing as well. At the same time, television has achieved the status of 'myth' ... a way of thinking so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is invisible.<sup>19</sup>

Postman's critique is stimulating and intriguing. His key point is that television has transformed modern culture into 'one vast arena for show business'. Most of the rest of the book goes on to show how this is true. First, there is the news, with the 'And finally ... story as light relief at the end of a broadcast about war, famine and crime, in a programme set to music which is inherently about entertainment'. Second, there is religion where George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards are contrasted with Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and Robert Schuller. Third, politics now involves television debates giving presidential candidates five minutes to outline a policy and the opponent one minute for a rebuttal. Fourth, there is education, where classroom computers are seen as essential to develop a child's potential and Sesame Street is good because it is entertaining. Postman's argument is not one of aesthetics but of epistemology.

What I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment the natural format for the representation of all experience ... The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Postman speaks, of course, of American culture. But perhaps we should recall the aphorism about America sneezing and Britain catching a cold. Surely much of what Postman has put forward is to some extent true in our own, British, culture?

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### **Are we amused?**

The implications of what Postman argues are applicable to Christians. Christians live in this television culture which has conditioned people to ways of thinking that are very different from even a century ago.<sup>21</sup> The media reshapes our perception of what is important, what is normal, what is to be desired and what is transcendent. The effects of this can often be most clearly seen among the younger generations of the church. Have we not all heard or said things which suggest that what we appreciate in a

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> See Pete Lowman, 'If There Really Is a God, Why Don't People Notice? A Media Studies Approach' ([www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=261](http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=261), 2005)

speaker or a conference or a book are to do with entertainment? Is the contemporary emphasis on music, the multiplication in ‘worship’ ministries, the high priority and profile given to music in churches, a manifestation of this shift? One easily observable difference between sermons of previous centuries and today is the presence of illustrations. Is this a response to the perceived need for Christians to be stimulated within the context of the spoken word in ways that pure ‘expository oratory’ (as Postman would describe it) cannot achieve for the modern mind? Is this a demonstration that Christians are just as taken up with trivia and entertainment as the rest of our society?

None of these things are necessarily negative. Christians cannot be reactionary, wishing ourselves back to the ‘good old days’ when a congregation would listen to an hour-long sermon without wriggling or dozing. Postman’s Age of Exposition was not necessarily the ideal climate for the church. Its emphasis on rationality proved fertile ground for a revelation-denying rationalism. Nor is the modern preoccupation with image new. As Postman himself points out, the second commandment is against making images to worship. The Apostle Paul describes the Christian as being those who do not fix their eyes on what is visible, but what is invisible (2 Corinthians 4:18). As these examples demonstrate, it is not only modern individuals who are prone to not listening. It has always been a problem. Believers, as well as unbelievers, have a natural desire for things made visible rather than audible. Thomas the Twin would surely agree with us here.

God, however, made Christ known in word in the Scriptures (not just in word, of course, but not less than in word). The issue is: What difference does it make to the business of preaching that the listener is perhaps less inclined, or less able, to listen than ever?

Let me offer a number of reflections which, although not revolutionary, may stimulate thought, consideration and discussion.

1. *The written and the spoken word must remain central to Christian ministry*

This is a comment more about content than about form. Scripture urges us to preach the word but does not restrict this action to one method alone.

2. *The tendency to reduce content and dumb-down preaching should be resisted*

Conversion and discipleship are empowered by the word brought to bear on the lives of hearers, however the hearing is achieved. A lack of content will have a debilitating effect on ministry.

3. *Our culture must be understood with the preaching of the word made as straightforward as possible*

If people’s minds are conditioned by the epistemology of television then there is little point ignoring this reality and pretending that subjecting listeners to long and dense exposition will be effective. Instead, people will need training to listen to propositional truth. Effective discipleship and faithful preaching to the unconverted is not dependent on long sermons, although, as time goes on maturity is to be desired and an increase in content will be necessary (solid food after milk).

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4. *Preachers need to learn to communicate faithfully without being tied to a particular culture of speaking*

If children of the television age have unlearned linear thought, then linear

thought will not necessarily be the model of preaching that works (from a purely human point of view).

5. *Church communities should make it an explicit aim to train children to listen*

God requires his people to be listeners and so his family are in a position to help people to do that from the youngest age. This does not entail removing them from the television culture, although that may be a good thing for other reasons. It does mean seeking to raise them, and train their minds to be able to think and understand rather than merely be entertained.

6. *The word of God needs to continue to be preached with all seriousness*

The shift from exposition to entertainment was a shift from seriousness to triviality, from reflection to amusement. If the effects of this shift have transferred in any way into the church, then Christians are liable to seek the superficial, easy, light and entertaining over the serious, reflective and profound. (Let it be heard very clearly, however, that serious and reflective is not the opposite of joyful and lively: it is the opposite of superficial and vacuous.) Evidence for this happening is not hard to find. To quote Postman's summary of the Huxleyian warning:

What afflicted the people in Brave New World was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking. 22

Christians should be thinking people because they know that the preached Word demands a serious, thoughtful response. Furthermore, a serious, thoughtful response should be required at some level of unbelievers who listen. To offer an undemanding message without the need for a reflective response is to sell out to 'the Age of Show Business'. We must have our notions of truth (and response to it) shaped not by television with its rapid, shallow gratification, but by God's words with its eternally weightier considerations.

7. *The preaching of the word must be done in the right context*

Postman highlights the fact that truth never comes unadorned: it must 'appear in its proper clothing'. What is the proper clothing of God's truth? The character of the truth-proclaimer and the life of the truth-community are vital for the preaching of God's word (see, for example, the letter to Titus). This has always been the case, but if our society is fixated on image then the right 'image' or adornment must be presented by the Christian community.

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## **Conclusion**

To preach the word of God has always been to swim against the tide humanly-speaking. Regardless of the cultural appetite for oratory, the natural inclination of a person when it comes to listening to God himself is to reject the message. This will be the case in every age. It has only ever been as the Holy Spirit enlivens the heart of the listener that they become hearers and doers, and are moved to trust Christ and to know the Father.

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<sup>22</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 163.

What therefore should we do? The gospel herald must do the same as has always been done by faithful people: hold out the word faithfully, boldly, lovingly and graciously, ensuring that it is lived out by the speaker and by the wider Christian family while working as hard as possible to make it as plain as possible. When this is done, by the grace of God listeners will become hearers and doers. Rescued from idolatry, they will have the eyes of their hearts opened to the invisible God, as the Image, who is the Word, takes residence by his Spirit.

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### **Northern Training Institute**

The Northern Training Institute provides an affordable, Bible college-level programme of study that enables students to integrate theological training with involvement in ministry through residential weeks, seminar days and guided reading. The Institute also promotes theological reflection on the practice of mission and ministry.

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