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MASC 684 Multiplatform Storytelling
Reaction Paper: Amusing Ourselves to Death, by Neil Postman
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Postman, Neil. (2005). *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition. New York: Penguin.

What would Neil Postman have to say if he were alive to write a second edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*? What conclusions would he keep? What conclusions would he discard?

In this prescient book, written in 1985 before the profusion of media platforms fueled by the growth of the Internet and mobile communications and commuting technologies, Postman argued effectively and (no pun intended) entertainingly that television—which brings an increasing flood of often irrelevant information and which emphasizes appearance and emotion over substance and thought—undermines culture. Citizens, overwhelmed by a flood of information about problems and places that have little to do with their daily lives, become overwhelmed, desensitized, apathetic. Matters of grave public import are reduced to photo shoots, sound bites and feel-good imagery; the end result is that the serious consideration of nation-shattering issues of the 19th century gives way to superficial (and often ill-informed) handicapping of politics-as-sports entertainment of the 21st.

On the surface, Postman's book may seem an anachronism. Television, which displaced newspapers and radio as a primary source of information and entertainment, is no longer the glue that holds popular culture (at least American popular culture) together. The Internet, which was in its infancy in 1985, was not mentioned in the original text. Mobile communications, which

were largely limited to radios, car phones and bulky portable phones large enough to function as close-range weapons, were likewise not mentioned. Despite the massive changes in the communications landscape in the 26 years since the original publication of Postman's book, however, his critique of the media and its role in our culture seems almost perfectly tailored to conditions today.

Postman accused television of shortening attention spans by reducing in-depth discussion of important public issues to little more than repetition of slogans and codewords in "news" segments typically lasting less than a minute. He argued that television, with is emphasis on visuals, rewards public figures who merely look credible—whatever that means—at the expense of those who do not look "right," but who actually display a thorough knowledge of the issues. One cannot sweat on camera and expect to be elected to statewide or national office, he says.

All of this is made much worse in today's media landscape with an emphasis on brevity (i.e. shallowness), such as in the 160-character limit in text messages and 140-character limit in Twitter feeds; graphics that tend to be more flashy than informative; and a 24-hour news cycle where information overload can lead to confusion and paralysis.

Postman in no way disparages entertainment as entertainment. In fact, he points out that he appreciates escapist programming, such as TV westerns and comedies, for its own sake. What he criticizes is the conversion of everything, such as news, politics and education, into nothing but entertainment—typically shallow entertainment at that.

Some of the effects of this media dystopia are not that serious. Televised wrestling—unless it happened to be from the Olympics or an NCAA tournament—almost always featured outlandish characters and fictional storylines. But the matches of 40 or 50 years ago made some pretense of

being real sporting events. (And they were, given that the wrestlers are athletes who face serious injury or death if something goes wrong in the ring.)

In the years after World War II, the National Wrestling Alliance represented regional professional wrestling associations in the United States. Each regional organization, such as Mid-South Sports, had its own "world" championship and pool of local talent—such as Skandor Akbar, "Cowboy" Bill Watts, the Junkyard Dog, Hacksaw Jim Duggan and Ted DiBiase in Mid-South's base of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas—who became local stars that rose from the regional ranks to compete for NWA "world" titles.[1]

Increasing television revenue, particularly that from pay-per-view cable outlets, fueled the growth and consolidation of the wrestling industry. Vincent K. McMahon—scion of a family that ran one of the early regional operations (the Capitol Wrestling Corporation whose territory was centered in New York City) and that established the World Wide Wrestling Federation in the 1960s following a dispute with the NWA—took over a then-recently renamed World Wrestling Federation in the early 1980s and used television and video revenue to fund a major national and international expansion.[2]

Its growing European prominence led to a lawsuit in the United Kingdom by the World Wide Fund for Nature, or World Wildlife Fund, whose initials were also "WWF." In a May 6, 2002, press release entitled "World Wrestling Federation Entertainment drops the 'F'!," the parent company announced that its logo and Web site would now be WWE instead of WWF. The press release began with the following statement, "To further capture a greater share of the global marketplace and to represent the growing diversity of its entertainment properties, World

[1] CowboyBillWatts.com. About Cowboy Bill. Retrieved from http://www.cowboybillwatts.com/?page_id=39
[2] World Wrestling Entertainment. Vincent K. McMahon: Chairman and CEO. Retrieved from http://corporate.wwe.com/company/bios/vk_mcmahon.jsp

Wrestling Federation Entertainment today announced it is changing its name to World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (WWE)."[3]

The new name is arguably much more honest in that it drops the pretense of legitimate competition.

In more serious matters, the 2010 debate over health care reform—aka "Obamacare"—in the United States was plagued by the trivialization of discourse described by Postman. Day after day, news coverage focused on angry citizens protesting the "government takeover" of the health care system by the federal government. The footage was compelling. The angry exchanges were entertaining. Repeated misuse of the term "socialism" and the equation of "socialism" with anti-democratic policies have so thoroughly permeated the body politic that almost any constitutional expression of government power and influence is now suspect. Glenn Kessler of the Washington Post's Fact Checker site, in discussing the confusion over health care reform, wrote:

> Some of the public confusion about what is in the bill is understandable. The long battle in Congress was often mind numbing except to a handful of policy experts, and key features were dropped or added along the way. Opponents often seized on small elements and exaggerated the impact, even if those provisions were no longer in the bill.[4]

While Kessler discussed how the participants in the health care debate fomented confusion, he did not address the media's contribution to the mess. The dramatic image/short sound byte/quick cut-and-run coverage rarely allowed enough space or time for public confusion to give way to public understanding. Despite the fact that the "government takeover" claim has been rated as PolitiFact's 2010 Lie of the Year,[5] the constant repetition of the claim has engraved the

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[3] World Wrestling Entertainment. (May 6, 2002). World Wrestling Federation Entertainment drops the 'F'!. Retrieved from http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2002/2002_05_06.jsp

[4] Kessler, Glenn. (Jan. 18, 2011). Myths and facts about 'Obamacare'. Retrieved from http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2011/01/health_care_myths.html

[5] Adair, Bill, and Angie Drobnic Holan. (December 16th, 2010). PolitiFact's Lie of the Year: 'A government takeover of health care'. Retrieved from http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/dec/16/lie-year-government-takeover-health-care/

accusation so deeply in the American consciousness that a significant percentage of citizens believe it is true.

In most cases, Postman's *Amusing Ourselves* seems a prophetic work. But one of his major conclusions likewise seems a bit premature. He spent much of his final chapters comparing two dystopian visions of the future, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. In *Brave New World*, citizens seeking pleasure—rather, stimulation instead of pleasure—willingly give themselves, their personal sovereignty, over to a despotic government in exchange for endless, yet hollow, entertainments. Huxley's government practices "better oppression through chemistry"—it essentially stones (in a 1960s sense) its citizens into docility and acquiescence. In *1984*, a totalitarian government imposes its will on its people, ruling by force and fear. Postman acknowledged that some governments followed Orwell's model, but argued that the media's pervasive influence in America, with its constant emphasis on entertainment rather than substance, better fit Huxley's model.

That was before 9/11.

After the coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush's administration embarked on a number of arguably Orwellian steps to "ensure" national surveillance. Terror suspects could also be incarcerated—apparently for life—with little or no opportunity to challenge their incarceration in a court of law. Terms such as "rendition" triggered images of individuals being kidnapped in the night and transported to third-party countries, where they could be tortured for whatever information—no matter how questionable—they might divulge. The U.S. government authorized torture of terror suspects. Such torture, whether officially sanctioned or carried out on a freelance basis, and the efforts to

cover up reports of such torture called into question whether the words "truth" and "justice" should be linked with the "American way."

Foreigners were not the only ones to fear the federal government. The Patriot Act introduced a number of measures that give the U.S. government greater power to spy on its citizens while giving the citizens no recourse in the event the government abuses its power. Such spying efforts benefit from the ever-growing tangle of digital trails Americans leave behind as they call, text, shop and surf the Web. The Patriot Act permits the government to bypass Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) courts that oversee domestic intelligence and tap electronic communications and seize Internet activity records without a warrant. In many cases the target of such government action is not informed of the investigation. In fact, it is illegal for recipients of such data requests to disclose that such an investigation is taking place.[6] The law is so draconian that the Cato Institute found that "The Patriot Act was designed to reduce privacy and increase security. It has succeeded in at least reducing privacy."[7]

Given that the media available today—along with the proliferation of computer systems, networks and databases that support them—make it much easier for the government to spy on, detain, and possibly track down and kill its citizens,[8] one has to wonder whether there is yet a place for Orwell in Postman's worst-case vision.

[6] American Civil Liberties Union. (Dec. 10, 2010). Surveillance Under the USA PATRIOT Act. Retrieved from http://www.aclu.org/national-security/surveillance-under-usa-patriot-act
[7] Lynch, Timothy. (Sep. 10, 2003). More Surveillance Equals Less Liberty: Patriot Act reduces privacy, undercuts judicial review. Retrieved from http://www.cato.org/research/articles/lynch-030910.html
[8] Shane, Scott. (Apr. 10, 2010). U.S. Approves Targeted Killing of American Cleric. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/07/world/middleeast/07yemen.html