

Reading 8

Amusing ourselves to death

Neil Postman

Notes

The following two extracts from different parts of Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* are required reading for the module *Working in Classrooms*. We suggest that you read them together with the related discussion and activities in the module.

Although both extracts about television, they also present a set of arguments about information, learning and education. *The first extract* ('Now...this') focuses on television news and news shows. Postman argues that all television, even television news and documentary programmes, is a form of entertainment. As you read the first extract, pay special attention to the argument that Postman gives to support his claim that television has created a kind of information that 'might properly be called *disinformation*'. Postman is writing about television in the United States of America in the 1980s, but he clearly intends his argument to apply to television as a medium and not just to American television. His argument is a disturbing one as it claims that television has the power to make people think they are knowledgeable when in fact they are ignorant.

The *second extract* ('Teaching as an amusing activity') focuses on so-called educational programmes on television and argues that they, too, are primarily concerned with entertainment. Postman does not doubt that television can bring about learning. But the kind of learning that it brings about, he argues, is a kind of learning that is hostile to book-learning and school-learning. In his view, school teaching and learning have been corrupted by the idea (from television) that education should be amusing or entertaining. As you read the second extract, think about the differences between television learning and school-learning. Think, too, about the different arrangements of time and space involved in a 'television curriculum' and a school curriculum.

*These two edited excerpts are from Postman, N. 1986. **Amusing Ourselves to Death**, New York: Viking Press.*

8.1 'Now... This'

[...][W]hereas we expect books and even other media (such as film) to maintain a consistency of tone and a continuity of content; we have no such expectation of television, and especially television news. We have become so accustomed to its discontinuities that we are no longer struck dumb, as any sane person would be, by a newscaster who having just reported that a nuclear war is inevitable goes on to say that he will be right back after this word from Burger King; who says, in other words, 'Now... this.' One can hardly overestimate the damage that such juxtapositions do to our sense of the world as a serious place. The damage is especially massive to youthful viewers who depend so much on television for their clues as to how to respond to the world. In watching television news, they, more than any other segment of the audience, are drawn into an epistemology based on the assumption that all reports of cruelty and death are greatly exaggerated and, in any case, not to be taken seriously or responded to sanely.

I should go so far as to say that embedded in the *surrealistic frame of a television news show* is a theory of anti-communication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. [...]

For those who think I am here guilty of hyperbole; I offer the following description of television news by Robert MacNeil, executive editor and co-anchor of the '*MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*'. The idea, he writes, 'is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead to provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action, and movement. You are required to pay attention to no concept, no character, and no problem for more than a few seconds at a time.' He goes on to say that the assumptions controlling a news show are 'that bite-sized is best, that complexity must be avoided, that nuances are dispensable, that qualification impedes the simple message, that visual stimulation is a substitute for thought, and that verbal precision is an *anachronism*'.

Robert MacNeil has more reason than most to give testimony about the television news show as vaudeville act. The '*MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*' is an unusual and gracious attempt to bring to television some of the elements of typographic discourse. The programme abjures visual stimulation, consists largely of extended explanations of events and in-depth interviews (which even there means only five to ten minutes), limits the number of stories covered, and emphasises background and coherence. But television has exacted its price for MacNeil's rejection of a show business format. By television's standards, the audience is minuscule, the programme is confined to public-television stations[...]. If you were a producer of a television news show for a commercial station, you would not have the option of defying television's requirements. It would be demanded of you that you strive for the largest possible audience, and, as a consequence and in spite of your best intentions, you would arrive

Reading

surrealistic frame of a television news show

– Surrealism is a form of art and literature that attempts to show the subconscious through dreamlike paintings or poems. Surrealistic paintings often combine objects that would not be found together in reality. Postman is suggesting television news combines bits of unrelated news with bits of advertising in a surrealistic way.

MacNeil-Lehrer

Newshour – American television news discussion programme

anachronism

– An anachronism is an event or custom which is out of keeping with its time. In the context of the quoted passage, to say that verbal precision is an anachronism is to say that it is old-fashioned or outdated. If you have been reading carefully, you will realise that both Postman and MacNeil reject the view that verbal precision is an anachronism.

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**What is
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at a production very nearly resembling MacNeil's description. Moreover, you would include some things MacNeil does not mention. You would try to make celebrities of your newscasters. You would advertise the show, both in the press and on television itself. You would do 'news briefs', to serve as an inducement to viewers. You would have a weatherman as comic relief, and a sportscaster whose language is a touch uncouth (as a way of his relating to the beer-drinking common man). You would, in short, package the whole event as any producer might who is in the entertainment business.

The result of all this is that Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world. I say this in the face of the popular conceit that television, as a window to the world, has made Americans exceedingly well informed. Much depends here, of course, on what is meant by being informed. I will pass over the now tiresome polls that tell us that, at any given moment, 70 percent of our citizens do not know who is the Secretary of State or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Let us consider, instead, the case of Iran during the drama that was called the 'Iranian Hostage Crisis'. I don't suppose there has been a story in years that received more continuous attention from television. We may assume, then, that Americans know most of what there is to know about this unhappy event. And now, I put these questions to you: Would it be an exaggeration to say that not one American in a hundred knows what language the Iranians speak? Or what the word 'Ayatollah' means or implies? Or knows any details of the tenets of Iranian religious beliefs? Or the main outlines of their political history? Or knows who the Shah was, and where he came from.

Nonetheless, everyone had an opinion about this event, for in America everyone is entitled to an opinion, and it is certainly useful to have a few when a pollster shows up. But these are opinions of a quite different order from eighteenth- or nineteenth-century opinions. It is probably more accurate to call them emotions rather than opinions, which would account for the fact that they change from week to week, as the pollsters tell us. What is happening here is that television is altering the meaning of 'being informed' by creating a species of information that might properly be called *disinformation*. I am using this word almost in the precise sense in which it is used by spies in the CIA... Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information – misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information – information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world. I mean to say that when news is packaged as entertainment, that is the inevitable result. And in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying that we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we

take ignorance to be knowledge?

[...]I do not mean that the trivialisation of public information is all accomplished on television. I mean that television is the *paradigm* for our conception of public information. As the printing press did in an earlier time, television has achieved the power to define the form in which news must come, and it has also defined how we shall respond to it. In presenting news to us packaged as vaudeville, television induces other media to do the same, so that the total information environment begins to mirror television.

For example, America's newest and highly successful national newspaper, *USA Today*, is modelled 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 colours. Its weather maps are a visual delight; its sports section includes enough pointless statistics to distract a computer. [...] As other newspapers join in the transformation, the time cannot be far off when awards will be given for the best investigative sentence.

[...]And so, we move rapidly into an information environment which may rightly be called trivial pursuit. As the game of that name uses facts as a source of amusement, so do our sources of news. 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.

paradigm – A pattern or model or central organising set of ideas and ways of thinking.

8.2 Teaching as an amusing activity

There could not have been a safer bet when it began in 1969 than that '*Sesame Street*' would be embraced by children, parents and educators. Children loved it because they were raised on television commercials, which they intuitively knew were the most carefully crafted entertainments on television. To those who had not yet been to school, even to those who had just started, the idea of being *taught* by a series of commercials did not seem peculiar. And that television should entertain them was taken as a matter of course.

Parents embraced '*Sesame Street*' for several reasons, among them that it assuaged their guilt over the fact that they could not or would not restrict their children's access to television. '*Sesame Street*' appeared to justify allowing a four- or five-year-old to sit transfixed in front of a television screen for unnatural periods of time. Parents were eager to hope that television could teach their children something other than which breakfast cereal has the most crackle. At the same time, '*Sesame Street*' relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children

'Sesame Street' – An American educational television show which aims to teach literacy and numeracy to young children.

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‘The Electric Company’ –
another television pro-
gramme for children
and young people.

how to read – no small matter in a culture where children are apt to be considered a nuisance. They could also plainly see that in spite of its faults, ‘Sesame Street’ was entirely consonant with the prevailing spirit of America. Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and would therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture.

As for educators, they generally approved of ‘Sesame Street’, too. Contrary to common opinion, they are apt to find new methods congenial, especially if they are told that education can be accomplished more efficiently by means of the new techniques. (That is why such ideas as ‘teacher-proof’ textbooks, standardised tests, and, now micro-computers have been welcomed into the classroom.) ‘Sesame Street’ appeared to be an imaginative aid in solving the growing problem of teaching Americans how to read, while, at the same time, encouraging children to love school.

We now know that ‘Sesame Street’ encourages children to love school only if school is like ‘Sesame Street’. This is to say, we now know that ‘Sesame Street’ undermines what the traditional idea of schooling represents. Whereas a classroom is a place of social interaction, the space in front of a television set is a private preserve. Whereas in a classroom, one may ask a teacher questions, one can ask nothing of a television screen. Whereas school is centred on the development of language, television demands attention to images. Whereas attending school is a legal requirement, watching television is an act of choice. Whereas in school, one fails to attend to the teacher at the risk of punishment, no penalties exist for failing to attend to the television screen. Whereas to behave oneself in school means to observe rules of public decorum, television watching requires no such observances, has no concept of public decorum. Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself.

Yet ‘Sesame Street’ and its progeny, *‘The Electric Company’*, are not to be blamed for laughing the traditional classroom out of existence. If the classroom now begins to seem a stale and flat environment for learning, the inventors of television itself are to blame, not the Children’s Television Workshop. We can hardly expect those who want to make good television to concern themselves with what the classroom is for. They are concerned with what television is for. This does not mean that ‘Sesame Street’ is not educational.

It is, in fact, nothing but educational – in the sense that every television show is educational. Just as reading a book – any kind of book – promotes a particular orientation towards learning, watching a television show does the same. ‘The Little House on the Prairie’, ‘Cheers’ and ‘The Tonight Show’ are as effective as ‘Sesame Street’ in promoting what might be called the television style of learning. And this style of learning is, by its nature, hostile to what has been called book learning or its handmaiden, school-learning. If we are to blame ‘Sesame Street’ for anything, it is the pretence that it is any ally of the classroom. That, after all, has been

its chief claim on...public money. As a television show, and a good one, 'Sesame Street' does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.

Moreover, it is important to add that whether or not 'Sesame Street' teaches children their letters and numbers is entirely irrelevant. We may take as our guide here John Dewey's observation that the content of a lesson is the least important thing about learning. As he wrote in *Experience and Education*: 'Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only what he is studying at the time. *Collateral learning* in the way of formation of enduring attitudes... may be and often is more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history... For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future.' In other words, *the* most important thing one learns is always something about *how* one learns. As Dewey wrote in another place, we learn what we do. Television educates by teaching children to do what television viewing requires of them. And that is as precisely remote from what a classroom requires of them as reading a book is from watching a stage show.

Although one would not know it from consulting various recent proposals on how to mend the educational system, this point – that reading books and watching television differ entirely in what they imply about learning – is the primary educational issue in America today. America is, in fact, the leading case in point of what may be thought of as the third great crisis in Western education. The first occurred in the fifth century B.C., when Athens underwent a change from an oral culture to an alphabet-writing culture. To understand what this meant, we must read Plato. The second occurred in the sixteenth century, when Europe underwent a radical transformation as a result of the printing press. To understand what this meant, we must read John Locke. The third is happening now, in America, as a result of the electronic revolution, particularly the invention of television. To understand what this means, we must read Marshall McLuhan.

[...] One is entirely justified in saying that the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classrooms but in the home, in front of the television set, and under the jurisdiction not of school administrators and teachers but of network executives and entertainers. I don't mean to imply that the situation is a result of a conspiracy or even that those who control television want this responsibility. I mean only to say that, like the alphabet or the printing press, television has by its power to control the time, attention and cognitive habits of our youth gained the power to control their education.

This is why I think it accurate to call television a curriculum. As I understand the word, a curriculum is a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence, teach, train or cultivate the mind and character of youth. Television, of course, does exactly that, and does it relentlessly. In so doing, it competes successfully with the school curriculum. By which I mean, it damn near obliterates it.

collateral learning – parallel learning; learning that is connected to but aside from the stated learning topic.

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Having devoted an earlier book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, to a detailed examination of the antagonistic nature of the two curricula – television and school – I will not burden the reader or myself with a repetition of that analysis. But I would like to recall two points that I feel I did not express forcefully enough in that book and that happen to be central to this one. I refer first, to the fact that television's principal contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that teaching and entertainment are inseparable. This entirely original conception is nowhere in educational discourses, from Confucius to Plato to Cicero to Locke to John Dewey. In searching the literature of education, you will find it said by some that children will learn best when they are interested in what they are learning. You will find it said – Plato and Dewey emphasised this – that reason is best cultivated when it is rooted in robust emotional ground. You will even find some who say that learning is best facilitated by a loving and benign teacher. But no one has ever said or implied that significant learning is effectively, durably and truthfully achieved when education is entertainment. Education philosophers have assumed that becoming acculturated is difficult because it necessarily involves the imposition of restraints. They have argued that there must be a sequence to learning that perseverance and a certain measure of perspiration are indispensable, that individual pleasures must frequently be submerged in the interests of group cohesion, and that learning to be critical and to think conceptually and rigorously do not come easily to the young but are hard-fought victories. Indeed, Cicero remarked that the purpose of education is to free the student from the tyranny of the present, which cannot be pleasurable for those, like the young, who are struggling hard to do the opposite – that is, accommodate themselves to the present.

Television offers a delicious and, as I have said, original alternative to all of this. We might say there are three commandments that form the philosophy of the education which television offers. [...]The commandments are as follows:

Thou shall have no prerequisites

Every television programme must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required. There must not be even a hint that learning is hierarchical, that it is an edifice constructed on a foundation. The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice. This is why you shall never hear or see a television programme begin with the caution that if the viewer has not seen the previous programmes, this one will be meaningless. Television is a non-graded curriculum and excludes no viewer for any reason, at any time. In other words, in doing away with the idea of sequence and continuity in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.

Thou shall induce no perplexity

In television teaching, perplexity is a superhighway to low ratings. A perplexed learner is a learner who will turn to another station. This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.

Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt

Of all the enemies of television-teaching, including continuity and perplexity, none is more formidable than exposition. Arguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio or, worse, third-rate printed matter. Thus, television teaching always takes the form of storytelling, conducted through dynamic images supported by music.[...] Nothing will be taught on television that cannot be both visualised and placed in a theatrical context.

The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment. And when one considers that save for sleeping there is no activity that occupies an American youth's time than television-viewing, we cannot avoid the conclusion that a massive reorientation towards learning is now taking place. Which leads to the second point I wish to emphasise: the consequences of this reorientation are to be observed not only in the decline of the potency of the classroom but, paradoxically, in the refashioning of the classroom into a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities.

[...]Teachers, from primary grades through college, are increasing the visual stimulation of their lessons; are reducing the amount of exposition their students must cope with; are relying less on reading and writing assignments; and are reluctantly concluding that the principal means by which student interest may be engaged is entertainment. With no difficulty I could fill the remaining pages of this chapter with examples of teachers' efforts – in some instances unconscious – to make their classrooms into second-rate television shows. But I will rest my case with 'The Voyage of the Mimi', which may be taken as a synthesis, if not an apotheosis, of the New Education.

'The Voyage of the Mimi' is the name of an expensive science and mathematics project that has brought together some of the most prestigious institutions in the field of education – the United States Department of Education, the Bank Street College of Education, the Public Broadcasting System, and the publishing firm Holt, Rhinehart and Winston. The project was made possible by a \$3.65 million grant from the Department of Education, which is always on the alert to put its money where the future is. And the future is 'The Voyage of the Mimi'. To

congruence: agreement,
harmony

describe the project succinctly, I quote from four paragraphs in *The New York Times* of August 7, 1984:

Organized around a twenty-six-unit television series that depicts the adventures of a floating whale-research laboratory, the project combines television viewing with lavishly illustrated books and computer games that simulate the way scientists and navigators work....

'The Voyage of the Mimi' is built around fifteen-minute television programmes that depict the adventures of four young people who accompany two scientists and a crusty sea captain on a voyage to monitor the behaviour of humpback whales off the coast of Maine. The crew of the converted tuna trawler navigates the ship, tracks down the whales and struggles to survive on an uninhabited island after a storm damages the ship's hull....

Each dramatic episode is then followed by a fifteen-minute documentary on related themes. One such documentary involved a visit by one of the teenage actors to Ted Taylor, a nuclear physicist in Greenport, L.I., who has devised a way of purifying sea water by freezing it.

The television programmes, which teachers are free to record off the air and use at their convenience, are supplemented by a series of books and computer exercises that pick up four academic themes that emerge naturally from the story line: map and navigational skills, whales and their environment, ecological systems and computer literacy.

[...]We may start thinking about what 'The Voyage of the Mimi' signifies by recalling that the idea is far from original. What is here referred to as 'integrating three media' or a 'multi-media presentation' was once called 'audio-visual aids', used by teachers for years, usually for the modest purpose of enhancing student interest in the curriculum. Moreover, several years ago, the Office of Education (as the Department was then called) supplied funds to WNET for a similarly designed project called 'Watch Your Mouth', a series of television dramatizations in which young people inclined to misuse the English language fumbled their way through a variety of social problems. Linguists and educators prepared lessons for teachers to use in conjunction with each programme. The dramatizations were compelling – although not nearly as good as 'Welcome Back, Kotter', which had the unassailable advantage of John Travolta's charisma – but there exists no evidence that students who were required to view 'Watch Your Mouth' increased their competence in the use of the English language. Indeed, since there is no shortage of mangled English on everyday commercial television, one wondered at the time why the United States government would have paid anyone to go to the trouble of producing additional ineptitudes as a source of classroom study. A videotape of any of David Susskind's programmes

would provide an English teacher with enough linguistic aberrations to fill a semester's worth of analysis.

Nonetheless, the Department of Education has forged ahead, apparently in the belief that ample evidence – to quote Ms Richards again – ‘shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and that television can do this better than any other medium.’ The most charitable response to this claim is that it is misleading. [...]

Postman presents a summary of research findings to support his statement that Ms Richards' claim is misleading. We have not included the summary here, as most of the works cited are not readily available to non-American readers. The main point of the summary of research findings comes in Postman's conclusion, for which we now take you back to his text.

In other words, so far as many reputable studies are concerned, television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order, inferential learning.

[...]What is of greatest significance about 'The Voyage of the Mimi' is that the content selected was obviously chosen because it is eminently *televisable*. Why are these students studying the behaviour of humpback whales? How critical is it that the 'academic themes' of navigational and map-reading skills be learned? Navigational skills have never been considered an 'academic theme' and in fact seem singularly inappropriate for most students in big cities. Why has it been decided that 'whales and their environment' is a subject of such compelling interest that an entire year's work should be given to it? I would suggest that 'The Voyage of the Mimi' was conceived by someone's asking the question: 'What is television good for?' and not 'What is education good for?' Television is good for dramatisations, shipwrecks, seafaring adventures, crusty old sea captains, and physicists being interviewed by actor-celebrities. And that, of course, is what we have got in 'The Voyage of the Mimi'. The fact that this adventure sit-com is accompanied by lavishly illustrated books and computer games only underscores that television presentation controls the curriculum. The books whose pictures the students will scan and the computer games the students will play are dictated by the content of the television shows, not the other way around. Books, it would appear, have now become an audio-visual aid; the principal carrier of the content of education is the television show, and its principal claim for a pre-eminent place in the curriculum is that it is entertaining. Of course television production can be used to stimulate interest in lessons... But what is happening here is that the content of the school curriculum is being dictated by the character of television, and even worse, that character is apparently not included as part of what is studied. One would have thought that the school room is the proper place for students to inquire into the ways in which media of all kinds – including television – shape

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people's attitudes and perceptions. Since our students will have watched approximately sixteen thousand hours of television by high school's end, questions should have arisen...about who will teach our students how to look at television, and when not to, and with what critical equipment when they do. 'The Voyage of the Mimi' project bypasses these questions; indeed, hopes that the students will immerse themselves in the dramatizations in the same frame of mind used when watching 'St Elsewhere' or 'Hill Street Blues'. (One may also assume that what is called 'computer literacy' does not involve raising questions about the cognitive biases and social effects of the computer, which, I would venture, are the most important questions to address about new technologies.) 'The Voyage of the Mimi', in other words, spent \$3.65 million for the purpose of using media in exactly the manner that media merchants want them to be used – mindlessly and invisibly, as if media themselves have no epistemological or political agenda. And, in the end, what will the students have learned? They will, to be sure, have learned something about whales, perhaps about navigation and map reading, most of which they could have learned just as well by other means. Mainly, they will have learned that learning is a form of entertainment or, more precisely, that anything worth learning can take the form of an entertainment, and ought to. And they will not rebel if their English teacher asks them to learn the eight parts of speech through the medium of rock music. Or if their social studies teacher sings to them the facts about the War of 1812. Or if their physics comes to them on cookies and T-shirts. Indeed, they will expect it and thus will be well prepared to receive their politics, their religion, their news and their commerce in the same delightful way.