Thirty-five years ago, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman warned that television was reshaping our culture and trivializing public life—including news, politics, religion, education, and business—by turning it into entertainment.

His concern was television's ability to so inundate us with irrelevant information that we'd lose sight of what was important and meaningful—even worse, we wouldn't care as long as we felt entertained.

Postman's central message resonates today because television has been joined by a host of even more distracting media. Devices like smartphones and tablets, plus numerous methods of communication, including email, texting, the internet, cable, gaming, and streaming, continue to enlarge the culture of entertainment he saw taking shape.
When this book was published, the year 1984 had just passed and Americans were relieved that the totalitarian scenario depicted by George Orwell in the novel 1984 hadn’t materialized. However, Postman argued that Americans were instead moving toward the different dystopian scenario of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, where entertainment technology rather than democracy became the ideology.

**Redefining Culture**

The rise of television as our dominant medium or means of communication in the second half of the 20th century redefined American culture.

Throughout human history, the form or technology of communication has dictated what ideas we express and how we express them. In replacing the Age of Typography or print, the Age of Television changed the content of our public discourse by redefining every aspect of public life, from politics to religion, as entertainment or show business.

We’re in essence “amusing ourselves to death”—that is, hastening the death of our culture by accommodating ourselves to television’s way of defining things, without thinking about or even noticing what’s happening.

**Form Dictates Content**

Television is just the latest example of how our forms of communication throughout history have dictated what is communicated and, therefore, shaped our culture.

For example, native Americans communicated with smoke signals, but the form—puffs of smoke—precluded complicated messages like a discussion of philosophy.

The telegraph was another medium whose form or design determined the information it delivered. The telegraph made it possible to move bits of disparate information lacking any context over long distances at incredible speed. Previously inaccessible information about fires, wars, and murders in far-flung places became part of local conversations and culture despite lacking local relevance.

Today, we’ve adapted to receiving news and information in a fragmented form because television and other electronic media are designed to deliver it this way.

**Print Culture in Early America**

To understand just how much television has changed the way we think and talk, it’s necessary to contrast today’s shallow entertainment culture with the serious, rational print culture that shaped America from the colonists’ arrival in the New World through the 19th century.

In that era, print structured public discourse, influenced its content, and appealed to and required a certain kind of audience—one skilled at reading and logical thinking.

The colonists were avid readers, particularly of the Bible, and they brought many books with them from England and had others imported. The literacy rate for all social classes was high.

Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, published on January 10, 1776, had an immense audience, selling about 400,000 copies. The equivalent in 1985 would be a book selling 24 million copies.

In terms of capturing public attention, Paine’s feat would be comparable to the Super Bowl today.

Attending debates on the issues of the day was an important part of civic and social life. County and state fairs offered lineups of speakers in three-hour slots with equal time for opponents. “Stump” speaking, in which speakers held forth while standing on a tree stump, was also popular in the West.

Speakers used the style of the written word with long, complex sentences, as well as rhetorical devices such as sarcasm, irony, and metaphors, knowing that their audiences would be able to keep up. They could also rely on their listeners’ familiarity with history and current events. Audiences had remarkable attention spans.

You could call this period in America the Age of Exposition, characterized by a way of thinking, learning, and expression. Print culture required and enhanced the characteristics necessary for mature conversation or discourse—for instance, thinking rationally, coherently, and objectively.
But by the end of the 19th century, the Age of Exposition began giving way to the Age of Entertainment.

**Decontextualizing Information**

Two technological developments changed public discourse: the invention of the telegraph, which removed the constraints on communication of speed and distance; and the development of photography, which replaced words with images.

**The Telegraph**

The telegraph, and the newspapers that relied on it for information-gathering, decontextualized information and turned it into a commodity. It didn't need to have a value to the recipient or serve any local purpose other than stirring interest or curiosity.

In oral and print-based cultures, information's importance depended on its utility or the possibility it presented for action. You could do something with it to affect your life or community. However, the *telegraph and subsequent technologies have disconnected information from action*. We have an information glut and, at the same time, a diminished sense of agency or control—after all, we can't do anything about a war halfway around the world.

Besides eliminating relevance and value, the telegraph undermined public discourse by making it incoherent. Print culture's strength is the exposition and analysis of information. The telegraph's strength was simply moving information fast. Messages were quickly replaced by new messages with no connection to what came before or after.

Intelligence no longer meant understanding context or implications. It simply meant knowing a lot of disparate, fleeting things in the form of sensational headlines. *The telegraph created a disorderly, disconnected conversation of strangers.*

**Images Overtake Words**

Adding to the telegraph's assault on print culture and coherence was the development of photography in the 1840s and '50s. Like the telegraph, photos eliminated context. A photograph represents only an instant; it presents the world as disconnected moments or events. Photos can't present ideas, only isolated objects.

Images have been around since the days of cave paintings, and they coexisted with words until photography launched an all-out war on language. Imagery—which quickly permeated American culture as photos, illustrations, posters, and advertisements—began to displace print in shaping our understanding of the world.

Print culture viewed the world as ordered, rational, understandable, and requiring citizen engagement. In contrast, the burgeoning image-driven culture later dominated by television viewed the world as chaotic, disconnected, distracting, and disempowering.

*The image helped redefine information and news* as having no continuity or importance apart from entertainment. “News” magazines such as *Life* and *Look* showcased dramatic or glamorous photographs lacking newsworthiness. Newspapers and advertisers learned that attention-grabbing images had a greater impact than explanatory writing. *Seeing became more persuasive than reading and thinking.*

Photography and the telegraph in partnership reshaped the news. Photos gave concreteness to faraway datelines. A photo, news story, and headline together created a feeling of context, but without any past or sense of continuity. It was a “pseudo-context,” created for information of no value beyond entertainment.

**A New Discourse**

The electronic media that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—television, film, and radio—accelerated the trends begun by the telegraph and photography. They created a disjointed, senseless world, where events constantly pop up and disappear from our view.

By providing a constant stream of compelling images unrelated to our lives, television culture has turned us from engaged citizens to a passive audience waiting to be entertained. Television tells us reality or life isn't rational, so it must be entertaining.

Entertainment, in itself, isn't a problem. It's that *television and its metaphor of reality as entertainment have taken over our homes, as well as reshaping every aspect of public life* and how we understand it. We've come to judge everything by its entertainment value. For instance:

- **Politics:** We choose politicians the way we choose products—based on how their television image makes us feel. And TV ads have become the dominant method of presenting political ideas, which has devastated political discourse. Our political knowledge takes the form, not of words, but of pictures. A 30-second ad is more influential than a detailed position paper.
Politicians are celebrities and sources of entertainment. In fact, celebrity has superseded political party in influencing our choice of candidates. Television creates the images, which don't tell us which candidate is better, but which is the most comforting.

- Religion: Television preachers need to create a spectacle to attract and hold an audience that can easily change channels, so they design their shows around lavish sets, images, and a...

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Here’s a preview of the rest of Shortform's Amusing Ourselves to Death summary:

**Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Introduction**

Thirty-five years ago, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman warned that television was reshaping our culture and trivializing public life—our news, politics, religion, education, and business—by turning everything into entertainment.

His concern was television's ability to so inundate us with irrelevant information that we'd lose sight of what was important and meaningful—even worse, we wouldn't care as long as we felt entertained.

Postman's central message resonates today because television has been joined by a host of even more distracting media. Devices like smartphones and tablets, plus numerous methods of communication, including email, texting, the internet, cable, gaming, and streaming, continue to enlarge the culture of entertainment he saw taking shape.

In the introduction to the 2005 edition of the book, Neil Postman's son Andrew argues that reading the book today is like turning on a light switch—we're shocked at the brightness or clarity, having not realized it had gotten so dark.

Between 1985 and 2005, our average time spent watching TV remained steady at about four and a half hours a day. (Shortform note: On top of that, we've since added at least three more hours a day of entertainment-based screen time viewing other kinds of screens.)

Postman warns that while transformative media technology dazzles and "amuses" us, it also powerfully influences us by dictating what we know and think and how we respond. We need to pay attention to...

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**Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Foreword**

In 1985, when this book was first published, the Cold War with the Soviet Union was still on and an actor-turned-politician, Ronald Reagan, was president. The Mac computer was a year old and USA Today was three. Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings were anchoring nightly newscasts, and the top-rated TV shows were *Dallas*, *Cheers*, and *Dynasty*.

As the year 1984 came and went, Americans were relieved that the totalitarian scenario depicted by George Orwell in the novel 1984 didn't materialize. However, Postman argued that Americans were instead moving toward the different dystopian scenario of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Differences between the two writers' visions included:
On oppression: In 1949, Orwell warned against externally imposed oppression (Big Brother depriving people of rights). In Huxley's novel, published in 1932, people allowed themselves to be controlled by feel-good technologies that lulled them into a state of complacency.

On freedom of information: Orwell warned against those who would ban books and deprive people of information; Huxley feared no one would see any...

Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Part 1 | Chapter 1: Media are Metaphors for Reality

Throughout human history, the form or technology of communication has dictated what ideas we express and how we express them.

In early America, print culture defined the world as ordered, rational, understandable, and requiring citizen engagement. In contrast, beginning in the late 19th century, the burgeoning image-driven culture later dominated by television presented the world as chaotic, disconnected, distracting, and disempowering. As a result, we became fixated on whatever was most entertaining, rather than most valuable or important.

In replacing the Age of Typography or print, the Age of Television changed the content of our public discourse (what we talk about) by redefining every aspect of public life—politics, news, education, religion, and business—as entertainment or show business.

We're in essence “amusing ourselves to death”—that is, hastening the death of our culture by accommodating ourselves to television's way of defining things, without thinking about or even noticing what's happening.

Our Television-Driven Culture

At various points in American history, different cities have embodied the spirit of the time. In the late 18th century, Boston and its surroundings nurtured political radicalism and the American revolution. In the mid-19th century, New York was the melting pot, and in the early 20th century, Chicago represented industrial might.

More recently, Las Vegas and show business have come to define the spirit of a time where public discourse, shaped by television, has taken the form of entertainment. Politics is an example. Pre-television, politicians were known for their words. But as television evolved in the 1960s, image and putting on a show became more important than what people said. Politicians had to be attractive and fit, or at least not fat—it's doubtful our 27th president, the 300-pound Howard Taft, could have been elected in the television era.

At the time this book was written, the U.S. president was a former movie actor, Ronald Reagan, who had observed years earlier that “Politics is just like show...

What Our Readers Say

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Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 2: Media Define Truth

As communication in America has shifted from print to television, public discourse has degenerated into nonsense. In the print era, conversation was serious and rational; under the sway of television, it's become shallow and incoherent.

The problem isn't that television produces garbage—print has produced its share of nonsense as well. Nonsense can be enjoyable.
In fact, the best shows on television are the “junk” shows, according to Postman. But television becomes a problem when it purports to be serious and aspires to conduct a meaningful cultural conversation—for what it defines as serious and presents as truth actually drown out truth with trivial nonsense.

Throughout history, the form of a culture’s media has influenced that culture’s conception of the truth (its epistemology). Following are several examples of how the type of media influenced what people believed to be true.

**Oral Culture**

In oral cultures, judges would decide disputes by searching their mental store of proverbs for one that seemed to fit the situation. The medium (the proverb) defined the truth and the parties accepted it as presenting a just solution. Similarly, Jesus drew on parables and sayings as a means of developing and illustrating truths.

**Legal Culture**

Today, we might use sayings and parables to teach lessons to children—for instance, first come, first served; the early bird gets the worm; haste makes waste. But our laws and legal culture are print-based. Lawyers and judges determine the truth by parsing written laws and legal opinions. They need to be well-schooled rather than wise. (Paradoxically, jurors are instructed to rely on what they see and hear in the courtroom rather than the written word).

**Academic Culture**

In academia, scholars consider published (written) words to have greater authenticity or truth than spoken words. They give credibility to published words rendered in a concrete form, which have presumably been thought through, revised, and vetted by other scholars and editors. The written word is verifiable, refutable, and...

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**Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapters 3-4: Print Culture in Early America**

To understand just how much television has changed the way we think and talk, it’s necessary to contrast today’s shallow entertainment culture with the serious, rational print culture that shaped America from the colonists’ arrival in the New World through the 19th century.

In that era, print structured public discourse, influenced its content, and appealed to and required a certain kind of audience—one skilled at reading and thinking.

The colonists were avid readers, particularly of the Bible, but they brought many books with them from England and had others imported.

The literacy rate for all social classes was high. For instance, in Massachusetts and Connecticut in 1640-1700, the rate for men was between 89% and 95%. For women between 1681-1697, it was as high as 62%.

Religion (being able to read the Bible) was a driving factor. In addition, immigrants to New England came from more literate parts of the Old World, or were a more literate demographic. Further, most New England towns required a “reading and writing school”; larger ones required a grammar school also. Reading influenced political, religious, and social life.

**The Centrality of Reading**

Most reading was done with intent rather than casually. Since there were no media other than print, reading was the way people educated themselves and accessed public knowledge.

It would have been difficult to read by candlelight or lantern, and people had little “free” time. Thus, a farm boy reading while following a plow, a family reading the Bible on Sunday, or a merchant reading aloud announcements of ship arrivals were purposeful readers.

The modern idea of “reading comprehension” as something separate from the act of reading would have seemed ludicrous, because comprehending was the purpose of reading.
Reading was necessary to participate in public life. To the framers of the Constitution, literacy and reasoning ability were essential to self-governance. It's why Thomas Jefferson advocated universal education, and why most states tried to ensure maturity and literacy by requiring voters to...

Shortform Exercise: How Much Do You Read?

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Americans were serious readers and thinkers. They read widely and attended public lectures and debates that delved into public issues in depth. Literacy was essential to participating in public life.

How much and what do you read in a typical week? Why do you read?

Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 5: Decontextualizing the World

Two technological developments in the mid-19th century changed public discourse and paved the way for the Age of Entertainment. The first was the invention of the telegraph, which removed the constraints on communication of speed and distance; the second was the development of photography, which replaced words with images.

By the mid-19th century, America had expanded to the Pacific. However, the difficulties of communicating over long distances limited national cohesion—the nation was a patchwork of regions with their own interests.

The problem was solved with the invention of the electrical telegraph, which could send messages over long distances in the form of coded pulses of electrical current transmitted through wires. By connecting the country with a communication network, the telegraph created the opportunity for a national conversation. But in the process, it redefined information and changed the meaning of public discourse altogether.

Redefining Information

The telegraph undermined the key components of print-based discourse: relevance, usefulness, and coherence, which are closely related. These effects were exacerbated by newspapers—the penny press of the 1830s developed hand-in-hand with the telegraph.

Making Relevance Irrelevant

The telegraph changed the definition of information by eliminating the requirement that it be relevant to the recipient.

Henry David Thoreau was one of the first to recognize that while the telegraph could send information great distances at lightning speed, a lot of what it sent might not be especially relevant to those on the receiving end. For instance, he wrote that connecting the old world with the new by running wires under the Atlantic was a dubious accomplishment if the system was used merely to report that Princess Adelaide had the whooping cough.

Newspapers played a role by seizing on the opportunity to obtain and publish information from far-flung places. Previously, they had focused mostly on community information relevant to local issues and decisions. But they soon began promoting...
In television's early stages, some people hoped it could be used to support and extend literacy. However, it was a false hope representing what McLuhan called "rear-view mirror thinking"—viewing a new technology as an extension of the old—for instance, thinking of a car as a fast horse or a lightbulb as a stronger candle.

Television doesn't extend literacy, but it directly attacks it. Unlike reading, television offers a constantly changing spectacle that provides emotional gratification without demanding literacy or any particular thinking skills to understand it.

It's entertaining, which, again, isn't a problem in itself—but **television goes further to suggest that we should naturally judge everything by its entertainment value.** And television presents all content or subject matter as entertainment. This is antithetical to print culture's treatment of information as rational and having a useful purpose—for instance, action or reflection.

**It's the Image That Counts**

Unlike good exposition, which is about communicating ideas, good television is about presenting images. On television, attempted conversations about serious topics are fragmented, shallow, and lack context—even documentaries don't dwell on a point for long or connect it to what comes next.

For a speaker to pause and think about a point or express uncertainty isn't a good image and therefore isn't good television. Television demands a performance that aims for applause, which is the whole point. Content must give way to the values of show business.

Television defines and reflects our culture—we learn what our culture is from television, and we expect life to conform to television. Shakespeare wrote that “all the world's a stage,” to which television adds, the stage is Las Vegas....

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Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 7: Television Redefines Truth

At the time this book was written, the phrase, "Now, this ..." was commonly used on television newscasts to signal a transition to a lighter story or a commercial. However, on another level, the phrase was an acknowledgement that television's presentation of the world had no coherence or meaning.

The problem is that when news is presented without seriousness, context, coherence, or rationality—the criteria for judging credibility in print culture—it's difficult for a TV audience to know what to believe. Here again, television has changed the meaning of both information and credibility.

In the past, information was believed if it reflected reality. In contrast, on television, whether a message is deemed truthful depends on the attractiveness, authority, and authenticity projected by the presenter/performer.

This has serious implications. If credibility on television (not actual truthfulness) is what counts, politicians don't have to tell the truth—they just have to appear sincere. Thus, Nixon's biggest problem wasn't lying, but looking like a liar on television.

In contrast, Ronald Reagan, a former actor, looked good and came across as so sincere on television that his frequent distortions and misrepresentations didn't undercut his popularity or likeability. In fact, as public interest in his presidential misstatements declined after some initial news coverage, so did further reporting on them.

The Meaning of Being Informed

Thanks to television, Americans may be the most entertained nation on earth, while at the same time, the least well-informed.

Even when events get widespread news coverage, people still know little in terms of history, context, or implications. Yet everyone has an opinion. But today, opinions are more like emotions than they are like the nuanced and informed opinions people formed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Polling indicates that today's opinions change, like emotions, from one day or week to the next.

The information Americans possess is really a type of disinformation. In the 1980s, disinformation referred...

Shortform Exercise: Are You Well-Informed?

Neil Postman argues that Americans are well entertained but poorly informed because the news we receive is fragmented, incoherent, and selected for its entertainment value. In addition, we don't question it.

Where do you get most of your news? Why do you use this medium?

Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 8: Television Co-opts Religion

When a form of discourse transitions from one medium to another, a lot may be lost or significantly changed in the translation, including tone, meaning, and value.

For example, poetry often translates poorly to another language; a condolence expressed by a card is different from one offered in person; and instruction by a computer differs from face-to-face instruction by a teacher.

As the medium of television has changed print-based conceptions and expectations of politics, news, and information, it's also
changing the essence of religion, in both message and presentation.

In 42 hours of watching religious programming in the 1980s, the author concluded:

- As a result of television's biases, religion becomes entertainment.
- On television, religion loses its sacredness, spiritual transcendence, and sense of the profound.
- It's decontextualized from theology, tradition, dogma, or ritual.
- God plays second fiddle to the preacher/performer.

Dazzled Preachers

Yet television preachers seem to assume that the meaning and quality of church-based religious experience translates to television.

This is because they're dazzled and deluded by gaining access to huge audiences. For example, Billy Graham extolled television as "the most powerful tool of communication ever devised by man." Pat Robertson contended in the 1980s that the church would be foolish not to use such an influential force. While the delivery method is different, he said, the message stays the same. For many years, Robertson hosted the talk show-style religious program, The 700 Club.

But the message conforms to the medium. When the medium changes, the message also changes.

How Television Undercuts Religion

Television and its environment negate the traditional religious experience in several ways:

1) The sacred environment of a church can't be duplicated on television. Churches by design create an atmosphere conducive for enacting religious rituals. Services can be performed outside, but the environment of a church must be recreated with symbols and sacred...

Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 9: The Television Commercial as Discourse

Television has also changed, if not undermined, the central idea of capitalism.

An outgrowth of the Enlightenment, capitalism envisioned reasonable, informed buyers and sellers engaging rationally in transactions of mutual interest and benefit. In a competitive marketplace, value would be paramount—buyers could recognize value and wouldn't buy a bad product.

However, television—or more specifically, the television commercial—upends this model of the consumer as rational. Making a rational decision requires a discourse: the seller makes a proposition, or claims about the products, which the buyer subjects to rational analysis.

But commercials don't make product claims. They're based on images—not words—designed to appeal to emotions; they're mini-dramas. For a commercial, truth is irrelevant—the viewer can like or hate it, but he can't refute it.

Television has shifted the focus of advertising from the nature and quality of the product to the character of the consumer—that is, to his fantasies and concerns, deduced from market research. Businesses aim to make consumers feel good by reassuring them through commercial psychodramas.

Commercials in Politics

The mentality of commercials has spilled from business into politics. We choose politicians the way we choose products—based on how their television image makes us feel.

And commercials have become the dominant method of presenting political ideas, which has devastated political discourse.
Our political knowledge takes the form, not of words, but of pictures planted in our minds by TV ads. A 30-second ad means more than a detailed position paper. Political ads tell us that our country's problems are as easily solvable as replacing lost travelers' checks. (Shortform note: There was a long-running TV ad campaign about lost travelers' checks.)

Politicians are celebrities and sources of entertainment. In fact, celebrity has superseded political party in influencing our choice of candidates. Their television images are...

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**Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 10: Education as Entertainment**

Public education, too, has fallen under the influence and dictates of television, which is redefining knowledge and how to acquire it.

The transition began in 1969 with the introduction of *Sesame Street*, which most children, parents, and educators immediately loved. Parents liked it because it made them feel good about letting kids watch TV. Teachers liked it because it made it easier to teach children to read.

But while it has helped to teach reading, television has undermined teaching and learning in the same way it's undermined other aspects of public life.

Teachers thought television would teach children to love school. But television teaches children to love school only when it's entertaining like *Sesame Street*. It sabotages the idea of traditional schooling in that:

- It's solitary rather than a social activity like school, where children learn social skills and interact with teachers.
- It teaches children to respond to images rather than develop language skills.
- It teaches that fun is the goal, rather than a means to an end.

Most important, television teaches children to love television—being entertained—more than learning.

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**Changing the Classroom**

With its influence over the time and attention of children, television overwhelms the school curriculum.

Television has rewritten educational philosophy by decreeing that teaching must be entertaining, that children learn better when they're being entertained.

Television's philosophy of education eliminates three tenets of traditional learning:

- **Prerequisites:** On television, each program stands alone, with no prior knowledge required. Every viewer must be able to grasp it; no one can be excluded. Television thus eliminates sequence, continuity, and connection as integral...

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**Amusing Ourselves to Death Summary Chapter 11: Huxley's Warning**

When a nation defines its culture as non-stop entertainment, it's at risk of cultural disintegration. In America, Huxley's predictions are coming to fruition. With our full embrace of television, we've unconsciously undertaken an experiment in giving ourselves over to the distractions of technology.

An Orwellian threat would be more obvious—we know what authoritarianism looks like. But we haven't recognized entertainment technology as our ideology. Like an ideology, television imposes a system of ideas and ideals, a way of life. It's launched a cultural revolution in America without discussion, a vote, or resistance.
So **how do we save ourselves from a Huxleyan fate?** Of course, not everyone will think it's necessary, but for those who do, there are only a few paths.

First, realize that Americans will never give up any technology. It also isn't possible to limit people's use of technology, although there may be temporary benefits from voluntary efforts like designating a TV turnoff month.

We could do more to limit certain content on television—like violence or ads on children's shows—the way we banned cigarette advertising. Also, we could try to improve quality, but remember, television is most damaging when it co-opt serious discourse in news, politics, religion, science, or education, and turns it into entertainment. We'd be better off with bad television.

**Changing How We Watch**

**Ultimately, the problem isn't what we watch, it's how.** Since television is most dangerous when we're oblivious to what it’s doing, the only viable solution is to see and question what we’re seeing. By asking questions, we demystify and break television's or technology's spell over us.

Some of the questions we should ask and answer are:

- What forms do various communications media take; how do they dictate intelligence, truth, and public discourse?
- How does each medium affect our thinking? What is it teaching us?
- What is the medium's...

**Shortform Exercise: Are We Headed for a Brave New World?**

Neil Postman argued that we may be headed for a *Brave New World* scenario where entertainment technology rather than democracy is becoming our ideology. To regain control we need to question how technology affects our thinking.

What does democracy mean to you? What are its foundations?