

# Amusing Ourselves To Death Summary

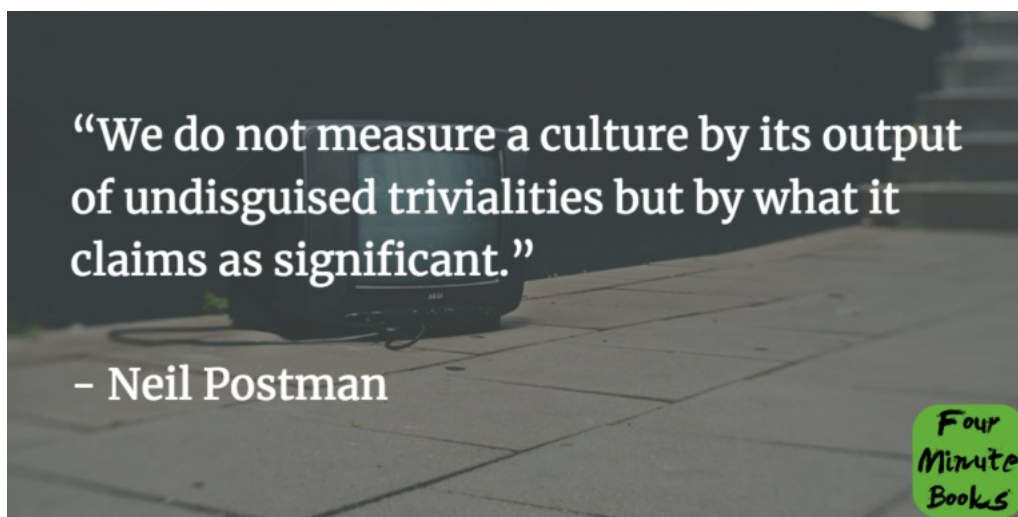
---

 [fourminutebooks.com/amusing-ourselves-to-death-summary](https://fourminutebooks.com/amusing-ourselves-to-death-summary)

**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Amusing Ourselves To Death* takes you through the history of media to highlight how entertainment's standing in society has risen to the point where our addiction to it undermines our independent thinking.

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



My native language is German. One thing that's always fascinated me in English class is how our idioms translate and vice versa. For example, if you want to help someone deal with rejection you might say: "Life's not always a bowl of cherries." A popular German equivalent we have is: "Life's not a pony farm." The idea is that on a pony farm, everything is dandy all the time.

A perfect world, in which everyone is always happy, is called utopia. Some of the world's most popular science-fiction explores what would happen if not only we tried to build such a place, but also if it went wrong. This is called dystopia – a miserable society. Video games like Bioshock, movies like The Matrix, and lots of classic books fall into the dystopian genre.

Two you might be familiar with from high school days are George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. One claims a totalitarian regime will watch our every move, the other assumes we'll be numbed to oblivion with consumerism and drugs. Especially after World War II, Orwell's prediction felt much more likely. So when, in the very year it "came true," Neil Postman showed up to the world's largest book fair and claimed Huxley was much closer to reality, he caused quite a stir.

*Amusing Ourselves To Death* was the result of his appearance. As early as 1985, it claimed that the rise of TV would be our fall. Here's his line of argument in 3 lessons:

1. The 19th century was the age of reading.

2. Telegraphy and photography stripped information from its context.
3. Everything you see on TV was twisted to entertain, so it's hard to learn anything.

If you're wondering why we've become such bad readers, this is the right place to learn. Let's go!

## Lesson 1: Less than 200 years ago, everyone was well-read.

---

A few days ago, the 52nd Super Bowl glued over 100 million Americans to their TVs. That's about a third of the entire population. Can you imagine a book being that popular? In recent history, only *Hunger Games* comes close, with about 65 million copies sold. However, even if your book sells 'just' one million copies, it's already part of the top 0.001%.

But not too long ago, things were different. *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine's 49-page pamphlet that advocated for the US to seek independence from Great Britain, was printed 500,000 times – in 1776. That means one in five Americans read it. That's because at the time, **reading was both a way of entertainment and the arena of choice for public discourse.**

Sure, politicians also gave hour-long speeches, but those were mostly supplemented with text and similar in structure and language. Also keep in mind: there were no photographs. Most people wouldn't have recognized the president if he walked by, but his writing they'd be familiar with.

Given text was the only medium available to spread and gather information, this reading 'trend' would continue through most of the 19th century, especially with subscription and one-off models for newspapers making it affordable for the masses.

But then...

## Lesson 2: The telegraph and the camera ushered in a period of little context.

---

Around halfway through the 19th century, the telegraph really took off. This brilliant piece of technology allowed people to communicate short messages over vast distances in a matter of minutes. Sending letters back and forth took weeks, but with a telegram, important messages could reach the recipient immediately.

However, as humans are, they started using the telegraph not just when it was necessary, but all the time, simply because they *could*. Meaningless messages about royalties catching a cold and political rumors became standard. Similarly, film photography enabled taking pictures at scale in the late 1800s, so advertisements and newspapers made good use of the fact that "a picture is worth a thousand words."

**What both these media have in common is that they convey information in a way that completely lacks context.** Think of them as the radio and Instagram of the time. So, when they took over public communication, the amount and frequency of information greatly increased, but the quality suffered.

People now knew more tidbits about everything, but much less about the few things that were important to understand in their entirety. That's a problem and it persists to this day.

### Lesson 3: On TV, everything must be entertaining, so the medium dictates the message.

---

Most innovations extend older technology, and when it seems they don't, we often find they picked up a thread we left untouched for dozens, sometimes hundreds of years. In case of the television, since initial programming covered only news, most people thought it was the next iteration of the printing press, a new way to spread information around the globe.

However, here Postman makes one of his central, contrarian arguments: it's not. **The television succeeds the telegraph and photography, and thus, continues to forge society's path towards contextless entertainment.** Video is a tempting medium, it engages multiple senses, but for us to keep watching, we have to constantly feel engaged. As a result, *everything* you see on TV has either been engineered to be in, or twisted into, a format that's entertaining.

Think about it. The news come with music, lots of animations, and reporters are oddly enthusiastic about disasters and the weather. Political debates equal a verbal boxing match, where whoever presents himself best wins. Commercials try to make a big splash to get you to buy things. Even church sermons and documentaries are forced to tell stories to keep you from switching the channel.

Today, Americans spend over 12 hours a day engaged with media, much of which goes to TV and streaming. If it's really all bark and no bite, maybe, on *Brave New World's* 100-year anniversary in 2032, we'll be closer to it than we'd like.

### Amusing Ourselves To Death Review

---

I haven't owned a TV since 2010. I do watch the occasional show and movie on my laptop, but ditching the news, or your standard TV access altogether, is a move I'd recommend to anyone, any day of the week. Just like *Amusing Ourselves To Death*.

[Read full summary on Blinkist >>](#)

[Free Preview >>](#)

[Learn more about the author >>](#)

## What else can you learn from the blinks?

---

- Which city has reflected the American spirit best throughout the years
- Why TV sucks as a church replacement
- How political ads have ruined public debate
- Three ways TV has changed our education for the worse

## Who would I recommend the Amusing Ourselves To Death summary to?

---

The 17 year old, who spends most of her free time watching TV, the 68 year old, who doesn't understand young people's obsession with social media, and anyone who loves watching the 8 o'clock news.