CULTURE

Are We Having Too Much Fun?

In 1985, Neil Postman observed an America imprisoned by its own need for amusement. He was, it turns out, extremely prescient.

MEGAN GARBER APR 27, 2017

CAROLYN KASTER / AP

Earlier this month, thousands of protesters gathered at Washington's National Mall to advocate for an assortment of causes: action against global climate change, federal funding for scientific research, a generally empirical approach to the world and its mysteries. The protesters at the March for Science, as scientists are wont to do, followed what has become one of the established formulas for such an event, holding clever signs, wearing cheeky outfits, and attempting, overall, to carnivalize their anger. "Make the Barrier Reef Great Again," read one sign at the March. "This is my sine," read another. "I KNEW TO WEAR THIS," one woman had written on the poncho she wore that soggy Saturday, "BECAUSE SCIENCE PREDICTED THE RAIN." Three protesters, sporting sensible footwear and matching *Tyrannosaurus rex* costumes, waved poster boards bearing messages like "Jurassick of this shit."

There was a time when irony was supposed to have died—when Americans, frightened and weary, worried that the world had robbed them of their constitutional right to laughter. They needn't have fretted: Irony—satire—political discourse that operates through the productive hedge of the joke—have not only evaded death in past decades; they have, instead, been enjoying a renaissance. Jokes have informed many prominent, though certainly not all, political protests; they have also, more broadly, come to shape the way people understand the world around them. Many Americans get their news filtered through late-night comedy and their outrages filtered through *Saturday Night Live*. They—we—turn to memes to express both indignation and joy. Jokes, in other words, with their charms and their appealing self-effacement and their plausible deniability (*just kidding!*), are helping people to do the messy work of democracy: to engage, to argue, and, every once in a while, to launch a successful bid for the presidency of the United States.

Scrolling through Instagram to see the pictures from the March for Science, I marveled at the protest's display of teasing American wit. ("Remember polio? No? Thanks, science!") And then I thought of Neil Postman, the professor and the critic and the man who, via his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, argued preemptively against all this change-via-chuckle. Postman wasn't, as his book's title might suggest, a humorless scold in the classic way—*Amusing Ourselves to Death* is, as polemics go, darkly funny—but he was deeply suspicious of jokes themselves, especially when they come with an agenda.

Postman died in 2003; were he still with us, though, he would likely be both horrified and unsurprised to see protesters fighting for the fate of the planet with the help of a punnified Labrador—or, for that matter, to see the case for women's inalienable rights being made by people dressed as plush vulvas. He might whisper

that, in politics, the line between engagement and apathy is thinner than we want to believe. He might suggest that fun is fun, definitely, but, given its amorality, a pretty awkward ethic. He might warn, with a Cassandric sigh, that there is something delightful and also not very delightful at all about a trio of *Tyrannosauri* who, in the name of saving the world, try their hardest to go viral on Facebook.

Postman today is best remembered as a critic of television: That's the medium he directly blamed, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, for what he termed Americans' "vast descent into triviality," and the technology he saw as both the cause and the outcome of a culture that privileged entertainment above all else. But Postman was a critic of more than TV alone. He mistrusted entertainment, not as a situation but as a political tool; he worried that Americans' great capacity for distraction had compromised their ability to think, and to want, for themselves. He resented the tyranny of the lol. His great observation, and his great warning, was a newly relevant kind of bummer: There are dangers that can come with having too much fun.

* * *

In 1984, Americans took a look around at the world they had created for themselves and breathed a collective sigh of relief. The year George Orwell had appointed as the locus of his dark and only lightly fictionalized predictions—war, governmental manipulation, surveillance not just of actions, but of thoughts themselves—had brought with it, in reality, only the gentlest of dystopias. Sure, there was corporatism. Sure, there was communism. And yet, for most of the Americans living through that heady decade, 1984 had not, for all practical purposes, become *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They surveyed themselves, and they congratulated themselves: They had escaped.

Or perhaps they hadn't. Postman opened *Amusing Ourselves to Death* with a nod to the year that had preceded it. He talked about the freedoms enjoyed by the Americans of 1984—cultural, commercial, political. And then he broke the bad news: They'd been measuring themselves according to the wrong dystopia. It wasn't *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that had the most to say about the America of the 1980s, but rather Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. "In Huxley's vision," Postman noted, "no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity,

and history." Instead: "People will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

The vehicle of their oppression, in this case? Yep, the television. Which had, Postman argued, thoroughly insinuated itself on all elements of American life—and not just in the boob-tubed, couch-potatoed, the-average-American-watches-five-hours-of-television-a-day kind of way that is so familiar in anti-TV invectives, but in a way that was decidedly more intimate. Postman was a media theorist above all, and *Amusing Ourselves to Death* owes debts, he acknowledges, to Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong and Daniel Boorstin and Elizabeth Eisenstein and Karl Marx and Lewis Mumford and the general notion that we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us. Mumford's theories of clocks, Ong's theories of speech, McLuhan's theories of everything—there they all are, making an appearance in this argument about the civic threats of laughter. Postman would wind his warnings about the dystopian dangers of television around his own adaptation of McLuhan's aphorism: The medium, he suggested, is not simply the message—it isn't straightforward or self-aware enough for that. The medium, instead, is the metaphor.

And the metaphorical nature of television, Postman argued, has meant that TV and its very particular logic—its assumptions, its aesthetics, its image-oriented and episodic understanding of the world—have found their way into other areas of American cultural life. Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death* early in the presidency of Ronald Reagan (the former actor, he pointed out, had won a second term in a field that included another celebrity, the former astronaut John Glenn); he wrote long after Richard Nixon had made that tentative, awkward appearance on *Laugh-In* ("sock it to meeeee"), and slightly before a relatively obscure governor of Arkansas would prove his ability to lead the most powerful nation in the world by playing the sax on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. He wrote during the time when it was the newly standard practice for national politicians like George McGovern and Jesse Jackson to both prove and amplify their popularity by hosting *Saturday Night Live*.

Postman was writing, that is, just as the amusement impulse was bleeding into nearly every area of American politics, bringing both irony and redundancy to the term "political theater." Gazing upon it all, he was decidedly unamused. He thought all the dramedies were missing the point. He thought they compromised

the other things Americans should value in their civics and in their culture: wisdom, principle, meaning. He pointed to the professors in college classes who were considered good teachers only if they could effectively entertain their students. He pointed to the televangelists of the time who brought an infomercial feel to the experience of faith. He pointed to presidential debates people watched not just to hear policy proposals, but to see great performances. "We may have reached the point," Postman remarked, "where cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control."

If the Americans of 1985 had indeed reached that point, and if the Americans of 2017 have surpassed them in the achievement, then it's been a long time, Postman suggested, in the making. To understand the American culture of the moment, Postman thought, you have to go back, beyond the television and the radio and the newspaper, to the telegraph. The buzzing electrical wires laid loosely over the nation in the 19th century—the network that first gave rise to the extremely postmodernist notion of information freed of its context—was in Postman's telling the harbinger and the ancestor of the American media of the 1980s. For Postman, the answer to the first message ever sent through telegraphic wires—the epic and ominous "what hath God wrought"—included CNN and *Star Search* and actors-turned-leaders and, if you project out just a little bit, *Squawk on the Street* and *Fox & Friends* and diplomacy-via-tweet and a presidential press secretary who may spread untruths from the highest podium in the land, but whose briefings are also the textbook definition of good TV, right down to the surprise cameos.

The telegraph, Postman argued, produced news and information that was, for the first time, detached from the rhythms of people's daily lives. Because of the telegraph, someone in Baltimore could read about a scandal in New York, almost as soon as it had done its scandalizing. Because of the telegraph, headlines—sensational, fragmented, impersonal—became the defining element of American media production. Because of the telegraph, news became instant and easy. "Where people once sought information to manage the real contexts of their lives," Postman wrote, "now they had to invent contexts in which otherwise useless information might be put to some apparent use." The telegraph, for the first time, "made relevance irrelevant."

And it influenced American media, on the whole, to continue in that pattern. The telegraph gave rise to yellow journalism, which found newspapers competing for

audience attention not so much via the information they shared, but via the entertainments they offered. It created a media environment that abandoned sustained narrative for more episodic delights—a condition, Postman put it, in which "facts push other facts into and out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation." Most of all, it gave rise to the biases that still inform our mass media today, creating, he argued, "a world full of strangers and pointless quantity; a world of fragments and discontinuities."

If it sounds familiar, it's because, as Postman would have it, we are still operating in the paradigm created by the telegraph—one that is extremely good at creating in-the-moment diversions and extremely less good at instilling in its consumers a sense of continuity, meaning, and wisdom. It's no wonder, in Postman's reading, that, today, "fake news" has thrived, that "alternative facts" has become a thing, that so many Americans both absorb and express political opinions via memes. It's no wonder that Malcolm Gladwell would produce an argument against contemporary American satire that would point to jokes as the masses' new opiate. It's no wonder, too, that some of the favorite entertainments of those masses involve a fictional genre that goes by the name of "reality."

Postman was a postmodernist who was uniquely suspicious of postmodern thought, and he worried, as Daniel Boorstin had before him, that our images had come unmoored from our fuller realities—and that people, being tied to them, were similarly adrift. He saw a world in which Americans were made pliant and complacent because of their cravings for distraction. He knew that despots often used amusement to soften and systematize their seizings of power. He worried that television—an environment where facts and fictions swirl in the same space, cheerfully disconnected from the world's real and hard truths—would beget a world in which truth itself was destabilized. "In a print culture," he argued, "writers make mistakes when they lie, contradict themselves, fail to support their generalizations, try to enforce illogical connections. In a print culture, readers make mistakes when they don't notice, or even worse, don't care."

In a television culture, he argued, the opposite is true.

Postman romanticized—really, he over-romanticized—print as a paradigm. He celebrated the literacy and erudition of the early American 19th century without paying much attention to the many, many people who were excluded from the era's

notion of politics. And he had very little to say about the plain counterargument to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which is that entertainment, engaging people as it does, can be extremely democratic. Americans have long leveraged the power of the lol to effect political change (see the humor that pulses through Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, or, slightly more recently, the suffragette Alice Duer Miller's 1915 book of satirical poetry, tellingly titled *Are Women People?*). Politically weaponized dinosaurs may be distinct creations of this supremely bizarre political moment; they are also, however, distinctly American.

Still, Postman understood what might come, because he understood what had been. He saw the systems of things. In one way he couldn't have imagined the world of 2017, one in which television, still, defines so much of American life. He couldn't have anticipated Samantha Bee or John Oliver or Seth Meyers or Stephen Colbert—he couldn't have known how comedians would come to double, in a culture saturated with information, as journalists. He couldn't have known that celebrities would be regularly asked to weigh in on the political conversations of the day, or that they would be excoriated for refusing to engage in those discussions. He would have laughed, probably, if he'd heard that the reality TV star who is president has promised not to fire his error-prone press secretary because "that guy gets great ratings."

He wouldn't, however, have been terribly surprised. Earlier this month, as President Trump launched a military strike against Syria and its leader's crimes against humanity, Brian Williams anchored MSNBC's coverage of the attack, narrating as footage showed U.S. missiles streaking like unsteady stars across the blank night sky. "We see these beautiful pictures," Williams said, seeming to forget, caught as he was in the moment, the people on the other end—people for whom the bombs would be so much more than mere images. Williams quoted Leonard Cohen. He talked, with wonder, about being "guided by the beauty of our weapons." He repeated once more: "They are beautiful pictures."

Neil Postman couldn't have known. But, in another way, he knew.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.