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## **Book Review: *Amazing Ourselves to Death* - Neil Postman's *Brave New World Revisited***

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*Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman's Brave New World Revisited* by Lance Strate. 2014. New York: Peter Lang.

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Media scholar Neil Postman wrote approximately 25 books during his career, the most influential of which was titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. In his book, Postman (1985) claims that the epistemology of television, which had become the dominant media form by the 1980s, had eroded the substance and coherence of public discourse, which increasingly took the form of entertainment. More recently, the media environment has undergone further dramatic changes with the emergence of the Internet, Web 2.0, and social media. Postman died in 2003, and while he continued to publish until shortly before his death, he never updated his most popular work to account for these changes.

Postman's former student, media ecologist Lance Strate, now takes up this task. His new book examines Postman's positions in light of the contemporary media landscape. His goals are twofold: first, to summarize Postman's positions and demonstrate their continued relevance; second, to present Postman's approach to media analysis, which is grounded in the field that Postman originated, media ecology. As such, Strate adheres closely to Postman's original ideas and carefully explicates them throughout each chapter. He also draws upon Postman's other works and a broad range of other resources. The book serves as a fitting tribute to Postman's enduring relevance.

The first chapter reviews Postman's original thesis. Strate explains that Postman's concern was that the epistemology of the television-dominated media environment had left people unable to distinguish between amusements and more serious matters. The problem, Strate asserts, is recognizing that serious matters require substantive engagement, which works against the biases of television. The cornerstone of democratic culture, he argues, is public discourse, which is based upon literate modes of communication.

The third chapter explains the theoretical framework of media ecology, which undergirds Strate's analysis. Media ecology offers a broader understanding of medium than the traditional conceptualization, which is usually limited to mass media such as television, radio, and books. By contrast, media ecology asserts that "medium represents both technology and technique, and technique corresponds to codes such as the alphabet, to formal elements such as artistic style, and to methods such as calculus, empiricism, and the assembly line" (Strate 2014, 47). In contrast to envisioning a medium as something that makes linear connections such as a pipeline, media ecology identifies a medium as something that surrounds or permeates an environment, altering everything within it. As environments of human interaction change, conceptions of meaning change along with

it, as do the people immersed in such environments. The term medium here is construed as a process of remediation between changing media environments and the humans who both adjust to and modify these environments through their actions. This transactional relationship, Strate argues, answers critics who charge that media ecology is deterministic.

Chapter 4 examines the evolving media landscape. Strate charts the development of electronic media beginning with the telegraph, which turned news into a commodity and led to newspapers abandoning a linear format and adopting a mosaic look—anticipating contemporary websites. Following Postman, Strate asserts that the telegraph inundated readers with decontextualized information unrelated to their lives, which ultimately fostered a sense of impotence about social matters. Television signified another major shift in electronic media away from language as the primary vehicle of transmission and toward the image, promoting discontinuity over linearity.

Strate contends that social media such as Twitter do not offer a new version of the public sphere as some had hoped. Such venues, Strate (2014) says, do not facilitate careful explanations or logical reasoning traditionally associated with print media, but rather continue the biases of telegraphic discourse, which places a “premium on the new, the novel, the current, the immediate, the now, fostering impatience with delay and promoting a present-centered mentality” (71). He acknowledges that such technologies increase possibilities for interpersonal connections, but argues that they do not enhance the potential for substantive dialogue.

The second half of the book explores how the changing media environment has affected social institutions such as journalism, religion, education, and politics. Chapter 5 on journalism begins with detailing the evolution from the ideal of objectivity associated with print journalism to the dramatic focus of television news. Building upon the work of Walter Ong (1982), Strate notes that writing cultivated the concept of objectivity by separating the writer from the content. With television, by contrast, a para-social relationship develops between reporter and audience, and credibility of the newsperson becomes the focus, which is an evaluation of their performance in the newsperson role. This loss of objectivity is particularly evident in the emergence of 24-hour cable news.

Strate notes that blogs have democratized news coverage but are also expressions of opinion rather than fact, which do not foster a sense of coherency about the news. Social news websites also add a democratic element, but Strate questions whether this is an adequate substitute for professional editorial judgment. Internet trends have moved increasingly toward the use of video, quelling hope that the Internet may offer a return to a text-oriented form of print journalism. He states, “Our digital devices and connectivity are further elaborations of the electronic media environment that retain and in many ways amplify the bias toward entertainment” (99). Strate’s (2014) concern, by way of Postman, is that this bias makes it more difficult to engage in serious discourse and thereby function as citizens, noting “if serious discourse is reduced to entertainment, then it falls to technical experts to take over the administration of our society” (100). Strate asserts that we must find ways to bring new media into alignment with the requirements of democracy.

In Chapter 8, titled “Grand Theft Education,” Strate reviews Postman’s analysis of television’s “curriculum” as one that is inherently hostile to schooling. Postman (1985) explains with a reference to *Sesame Street*: “*Sesame Street* encourages children to love school only if school is like *Sesame Street*” (143), meaning that it makes learning and entertainment inseparable. Postman draws upon John Dewey’s (1938) analysis of “collateral learning,” or the dispositions fostered within students as a result of their educational experiences (48). Strate applies this analysis to newer technologies, contending that while computers reinforce some print biases, social media and hyperlinks encourage superficial skimming rather than deep reading. He tackles online education, asserting that affluent people still prefer traditional classrooms with high-quality teachers and personal tutoring, stating “at the core, the problem of education is a human one, not a matter of insufficient information or insufficient methodologies” (Strate 2014, 131). While online and other new technologies may extend learning possibilities, they may also amputate them, a point true for any educational materials or methods. The goal, Strate argues, is to achieve a healthy balance.

In the final chapter, Strate searches for solutions to the problems he has outlined. He says that we cannot go back to a simpler time, nor should we deny the benefits of new technologies. Rather, we should “engage in concerted evaluation of what we are doing and how we go about doing it, to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of our technologies, to consider what are the appropriate uses of our media, and what uses might be inappropriate, and to proceed with caution” (Strate 2014, 138). Media ecologists believe that making media environments “visible” through critical examination, particularly within formal education, is the first step toward creating a balanced media environment. This has implications for media literacy, as it suggests that the study of different media forms and their social effects should be facets of a media literacy curriculum.

To achieve balance, Strate suggests bolstering aspects of orality, including face-to-face conversation, playing music, singing, and reading poetry. He also advocates print literacy practices, including sustained book reading, reading out loud, handwriting, and letter writing. Strate argues that environments that run counter to the biases of electronic media must be forged and sustained by conscious human practice. This would afford space to more objectively assess the dominant media environment, helping to achieve the goal of “finding the appropriate contexts for the specific purposes we have in mind, the appropriate medium for the kinds of communication we wish to engage in, the appropriate environment for living a fully human life” (Strate 2014, 145).

Some readers may contend that Strate, following Postman, overplays the negative consequences of media technologies, while downplaying the potential benefits. This may be the case. However, the call for balancing cultural sensibilities is an important one, and Strate’s elaboration of Postman’s theories, along with his elucidation of media ecology, makes this useful reading for media educators who want to critically assess the purposes underlying their own work.

### References

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