

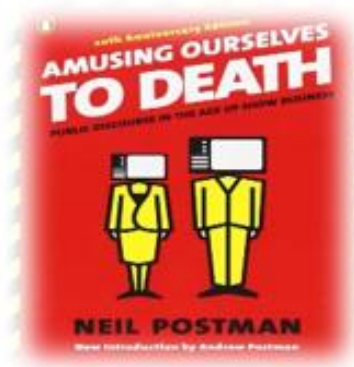
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #213

October 2025

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Neil Postman's 'Amusing Ourselves to Death:
What happens when everything becomes entertainment?'



You can say a lot of things about Roger Ailes, the sexual harassing [1] founder of Fox News, but the one thing you can't say is that he was wrong.

Ailes, who, among other things, was the media consultant to Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign, is credited with saying that Nixon would be the last politician elected president. All the rest would be entertainers. Nixon has had nine

or 10 successors (depending upon how we count President Donald Trump and his two non-consecutive terms). Some were more overt than the others, but all sported a dash of entertainer.

Gerald Ford never looked comfortable in front of a camera, but what we remember best about him is that disembarking from Air Force One, he fell down the steps. Jimmy Carter could play the country parson better than most country parsons and, of course, before he became a politician, Ronald Reagan was a highly accomplished Hollywood actor. Two of the nine, Reagan and Trump, were authentic media stars before they became politicians. Reagan made his mark in the movies (“Bedtime for Bonzo”) and on TV (“General Electric Theater” hawking General Electric appliances sauced with a dash of conservative bromides).

On TV’s “The Apprentice” Trump played the tycoon he only sort of was in real life. In “real life,” he tended to go bankrupt with startling frequency.

George H.W. Bush was a one-termer primarily because he couldn’t match Bill Clinton’s charm and never played the saxophone for Arsenio Hall, which Clinton did. The mediagenic Barack Obama rose to prominence on the strength of one televised speech and George W. Bush played “the good old boy” with folksy charm camouflaging his patrician pedigree and elite education (Yale BA in history and Harvard MBA). No one ever accused Joe Biden of being an entertainer, but one disastrous TV debate ended his career offering ironic if negative support for Ailes’ assertion.

Speaking of Ford, Ailes also originated the “Orchestra Pit Theory” of political news coverage. He thought the sensational always trumped (I use the verb intentionally) the important and factual. He quipped, “If you have two guys on a stage and one guy says, ‘I have a solution to the Middle East problem,’ and the other guy falls in the orchestra pit, who do you think is going to be on the evening news?” [2] Actually, that is giving Ailes too much credit. William Randolph Hearst anticipated him by a century with “yellow journalism” (yellow because one of his tabloids was printed on yellow paper) as he gathered readers by taking them on a cruise through the sleazier realms of late-19th-century America. Hearst was Fox News’ Rupert Murdoch before the Murdochs. We could go back as far as the venerable Benjamin Franklin, who pumped circulation for his brother James’ New-England Courant by penning witty and satirical newsletters critiquing the social issues of the time under the pen name Silence Dogood.

So, it seems the news has always had a dollop of the theatrical and entertaining about it. In the electronic era, however, “infotainment” now swamps the disinterested and nuanced treatment of information crucial to the survival of democratic government.

President Trump fleeing the ghost of Jeffrey Epstein by promoting false flag incursions into American cities reminded me of all of this — incursions which the electronic media treats as visual spectacles with little or no analysis of their Constitution-battering implications. For the mainstream media, which Trump accurately characterized as “lamestream,” it was all just a show much like the WWE wrestling Trump adores. His Secretary of Education, Linda McMahon, co-owned WWE with her husband Vince McMahon. It is now owned by something called TKO Group Holdings, which is a subsidiary of Endeavor Group Holdings which is itself a part of a Matryoshka (nesting dolls) of interrelated investment groups. [3] Unraveling that thicket would test the wits of Hicks McTaggart, Thomas Pynchon’s latest schlemiel of a detective trying to unknot a knotted world’s labyrinth of conspiracies. [4] Adding another Pynchonesque touch to it, Vince McMahon departed the company in 2024 after a former employee sued him for sexual assault and sex trafficking her. [5]

You can’t make this stuff up, but in America in 2025, it happens every day.

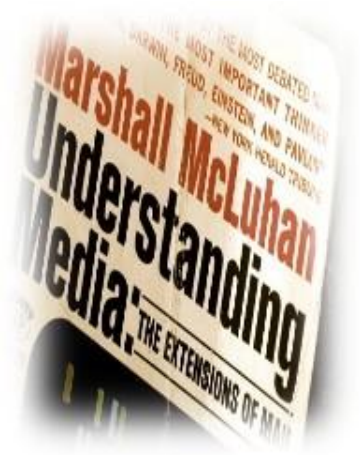
As numerous **Book Notes** these past five years have noted, it has been happening for a long, long time. As long ago as September 2020, we discussed all of this in **Book Note** #25 reviewing Kurt Andersen’s “Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire.” It can be found [here](#). Multiple other **Book Notes** analyzing modern media’s affect upon the American psyche and American society have tried to parse how American’s abandoned, in Karl Rove’s memorable phrase, “the reality based world” to dwell in the mediasphere. [6] You can find them with a bit of scrolling [here](#).



In a **Book Note** two weeks ago about ChatGPT, I mentioned Neil Postman’s “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” It is one of the foundational books necessary to begin to understand what modern media has done to the American psyche. In my

The American Tapestry Project, when discussing mediated America, I introduce the topic with this slide:

Marshall McLuhan got a lot of things wrong (not as many as some of his detractors claim), but he got the big thing 100% correct: media are not neutral. I'm not going to turn this into a lecture on communications theory, but a medium (of which media is the plural) is a channel of communication connecting a message's sender and receiver. McLuhan's brilliant insight was to document that media (channels) are not neutral. They impose their own ways of seeing the world upon the message and shape how it is transmitted, received, and understood. They shape how the sender and receiver experience and understand the world.



Print is linear, sequential, and logical. It fosters argumentation, not in the sense of dispute, but in the sense of marshaling evidence in support of a thesis. It is biased, if you will, toward fact and reasoning. In short, it is rational. Visual media, on the other hand, is imagistic. You know the cliché: a picture is worth a thousand words. In fact, it might take a thousand words to convey what an image can do in an instant. Images are all surface-level. Unlike print, they are not discursive and do not make an argument supported by nuanced evidence; that is, they do not advance a thesis. But they can make a point. Inherently emotional, they short circuit rational analysis replacing it with feelings, mood, and disposition. [7]



Daniel Boorstin's 1962 "The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America" took McLuhan's premise as a starting point as Boorstin tried to understand how modern media images functioned. He discovered that contemporary society is increasingly dominated by visual images rather than a rational, discursive analysis of reality (*pace* Karl Rove). Boorstin's thesis argued that images serve as powerful models, distorting our perceptions and understanding of the world. He said they find their most widespread usage in pseudo-events created solely for media consumption and distribution. Writing over 60 years ago, he used televised presidential debates as an example. In 1960, when candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon met in the first ever presidential debate, those who heard it on radio (which then was still a medium of some substance) thought Nixon had a better grasp of

events and won the debate. But those who saw it on TV thought the handsome, articulate, and mediagenic Kennedy, who looked like a movie star, prevailed.

Image trumped substance.

Just as in Chicago in 2025, a town allegedly under siege by illegal aliens and other desperados. ICE is on the march and so, too, the National Guard. But amidst the siege, over 54,000 runners took part in the 2025 Chicago Marathon on Sunday, Oct. 12, with tens upon tens of thousands of peaceful spectators cheering them on. As the Chicago Sun-Times quoted one, “I’m so grateful to be in so many community spaces where strangers come together and support one another...the fact that we have people from across the world who will show up for an event like this in our city just goes to show that this (Chicago) is no ‘hellhole’”. [8]

So, who are you going to believe: random images of apparently illegal search and seizures, or your own lying eyes?

In the “Media, Media, Media” photo above, the figure in the middle is a statue of a cowboy at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. It portrays movie star John Wayne looking resolute and macho armed with a six-gun and rifle.

The utter image of a “cowboy.”

Except John Wayne was never a cowboy, and cowboys didn’t win the West.

Farmers won the West. If you’re going to use images to understand how the West was won, think “Little House on the Prairie” and wave after wave of farmers who settled the land.

John Wayne was actually from Glendale, California. His real name was Marion Morrison, the son of a pharmacist, and a football player at Southern Cal. When he hurt his back surfing and couldn’t play football anymore, Morrison and some buddies went across town to Hollywood to see if they could earn some beer money as extras. Strikingly handsome, the camera loved the young Morrison. After a few fringe appearances in minor films and a name change, he emerged from the cast of thousands of extras to snag a role in 1930’s “The Big Trail.” His star dimly glimmered



throughout the 1930s, but in 1939 he got the lead in John Ford's classic western "Stagecoach" and, as they say, the rest is history. In fact, Wayne and other stars like Gary Cooper and much later Clint Eastwood swamped the historical cowboys, who were actually migrant farm laborers of whom about 25% were Black Americans.

Image triumphed over reality.

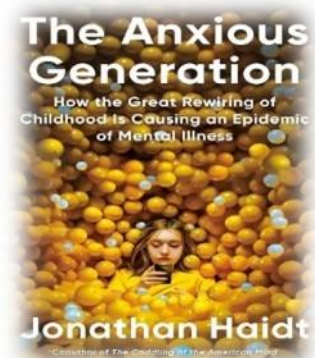
Trying to ride that triumph, Barry Goldwater donned a cowboy hat and ran for president in 1964. Sixteen years later, another movie cowboy, Ronald Reagan, won the presidency.



Jumping ahead for a moment, in his 2011 "The Shallows," Nicholas Carr analyzes the impact of the internet on human intelligence and our ability to think. Carr argues that the rapid flow of information and the emphasis on multitasking lead to a shift in our thinking processes, favoring shallow, scattered thinking over deep, focused contemplation. Carr thinks our brains are literally being rewired (reprogrammed) to value efficiency over complex, nuanced thinking. He believes this may diminish (has diminished?) our ability to think critically (analytically) and to experience emotional

depth as we click from link to link in search of the latest buzz. Like McLuhan, and we will shortly see, Postman, he fears the efficiency above all else learning style of the computer age will thwart the literary mind's ability to think inferentially and in depth.

Last February's **Book Notes** #197, which can be found [here](#), examined Jonathan Haidt's "The Anxious Generation." While in the process of researching a book on the impact of social media and the internet on American culture and politics, Haidt discovered what he called a profoundly disturbing correlation between the rise of mental illness among young Americans since 2012 and the introduction of the smartphone. As I have pointed out in other spaces and Haidt agrees, the smartphone you carry in your pocket or purse isn't a "phone." It is a powerful minicomputer orders of magnitude more powerful than the computer guiding Apollo11 to the moon. The constant barrage of alerts and notifications fractures attention; carried around all day at school, it short-circuits student learning.



More critically, social media platforms with their “Like” and “Share” buttons have created a hellscape for young people seeking to craft a coherent sense of identity. Haidt details with copious data the correlation between smartphone usage and rising rates of hospitalization for self-harm and attempted suicide among the young. The impact has been particularly profound on young girls. In some ways, Haidt documents the impact of the merging threads of a web of mediated connections stemming from the power of images to sweep aside more nuanced and reflective learning and self-awareness. Consumed by the need for endless distraction (“entertainment”), large numbers of young people and increasingly their elders find it harder and harder to stay in the “reality-based world” as they slip away into an endlessly entertaining world of images and images and images.

Afterall, what is a “meme” if not a metastasizing image?

In his 1985 “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” which despite focusing on TV is, if anything, even more relevant today, Neil Postman takes McLuhan’s famous dictum “the medium is the message” a step further saying “the medium is the metaphor”: each medium supplies a way of seeing the world. As a result, it makes certain types of discourse possible and other kinds improbable. Postman argues that when the logic of entertainment (TV, and by implication all visual and digital media) becomes society’s primary way of receiving information, the serious discussion and analysis of current social issues – politics, education, news, religion – devolves into spectacle and triviality.

In books like “Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology,” “Building a Bridge to the 18th Century,” and “Amusing Ourselves to Death” Postman created the notion of media ecology: the view that technologies and media constitute environments that shape human thought and social organization – *mediaspheres*. The printing press invented typographic culture, which valued argument, factuality, and extended public reasoning. Print culture – books and newspapers – reared citizens who could think, deliberate, and act rationally. But the rise of visual culture, in particular movies and TV, transformed the sharing of information into entertainment. The newspaper became the newscast characterized by a series of visually vivid but context-light segments; politics became image driven (sound bites and debates judged as performances – see Nixon v. Kennedy in 1960 or Trump v. Biden in 2024. In fact, Trump, who is extraordinarily media savvy, refused to debate Kamala Harris a second time after she exposed his shallowness and contradictions in their first debate.) In Postman’s world, education becomes entertainment and religion and advertising blend into an infomercial on the TV chapel or tent revival of your choice.

In every domain of human activity Postman thinks TV’s aesthetic values – brevity, spectacle, and surface coherence – have driven print’s argumentative logic, evidence, and critical judgment out of the marketplace of ideas. Image triumphs over substance. Think for a moment about cable news network programming.

First, they are not news programs, but “debates” in which Blowhard #1 posits an “idea” which Blowhard #2 immediately attacks with their own “idea” and Blowhard #3 talks over both trashing their nonsense. Information is not the point; spectacle is and its accompanying adrenaline rush as audiences passively watch the faux combat seeking some sort of escape from – escape from what? Their own dreary lives or their increasingly addictive need for more adrenaline-laced facts and factoids. In Postman’s view, TV, and its heirs (computer screens, smartphone screens, tablet screens: it’s screens, screens, screens all the time as more and more people seek an adrenaline fix) have reshaped all programming, even allegedly serious programming, to attract continual attention by reshaping content to emphasize affect, novelty, and spectacle.

Postman framed his concern for the culture damaging impact of this media fixation by comparing two dystopian dreamscapes: George Orwell’s “1984” in which an authoritarian regime maintains its power by censorship with Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” in which the authoritarian regime maintains its power by seducing its subjects with an endless stream of entertainment. Huxley imagined wall-mounted radios with picture screens (i.e., he imagined TV before TV existed) in each home seducing and subjugating a stupefied populace with trivial pleasures. Nowadays, the wall mounted fictional screens have become everyday realities accompanied by platoons of little screens distracting and amusing the masses with endless entertainment 24/7/365 on, if not infinite, innumerable screens offering every diversion imaginable.

What Postman did not anticipate is an authoritarian (or wannabe authoritarian) regime that does both, and doing both weaves them into one ongoing serial program of endless entertainment. From candidate Trump in fall 2024 swaying to the music of his own playlist as his adoring devotees vicariously joined him, to a flooding of the daily zone with innumerable actions that only a scant 10, 15, 20 or more years ago would have been unthinkable: extorting universities into meek submission; masked agents roaming American cities looking for illegal aliens and scooping up both illegals and citizens alike; the government shutting down; the military shooting boats out of the water under questionable pretense in the Gulf of Mexico (or is it the Gulf of America?); freeing former U.S. Rep. and serial liar George Santos because prison was taxing for him; and on and on. Government as an unending WWE world-wide professional wrestling show making even the NFL seem puny in comparison.

Large swaths of the populace endlessly diverted by the angst of an “other” they once called neighbor threaten the end of the American experiment while another large swath takes to the streets chanting “No Kings” while yet other swaths of even greater numbers – supine in their stupefied pleasure – watch the show in the comfort of their mortgaged living room in, as NBC once said, “living color.”

The medium is, indeed, the message, if not the metaphor.

If message, what message is it sending Americans in 2025?

If metaphor, what implied comparison to times past or times future does it foretell?

Or, phrased another way, what happens when the mediated world finally collides with Karl Rove's "reality-based world"? Or, like what happened to Roger Ailes, what happens when someone with at least a toe still planted in reality calls them on their transgressions?

Stay tuned – as they used to say on all night TV infomercials: "All this and more!"

Author's note: To learn more about mediated America, Larry Sabato will appear at the Jefferson Global Summit at 7 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 14, at the Jefferson Educational Society, 3207 State St.



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"John Wayne in Riders of Destiny (1933) 02.png" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:John Wayne in Riders of Destiny \(1933\) 02.png - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed October 18, 2025.

End Notes

1. See Grynbaum, Michael M. and John Koblin, "Fox Settles With Gretchen Carlson Over Roger Ailes Sex Harassment Claims," **The New York Times** (Sept. 6, 2016) available at [Fox Settles With Gretchen Carlson Over Roger Ailes Sex Harassment Claims - The New York Times](#) and Gabriel Sherman, "Fox News Host Andrea Tantaros Says She Was Taken Off the Air After Making Sexual-Harassment Claims Against Roger Ailes," **Intelligencer**

- (Aug. 9, 2016) available at [Andrea Tantaros Made Harassment Claims Against Roger Ailes](#) both accessed October 8, 2025.
2. Bogus, Carl T., “*The Death of an Honorable Profession*,” **Indiana Law Journal** (Fall 1996 v. 71 n. 4), pp.935-936 available at [The Death of an Honorable Profession](#) accessed October 8, 2025.
3. “WWE” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at [WWE - Wikipedia](#) accessed October 12, 2025.
4. See Pynchon, Thomas. **Shadow Ticket**. (New York: Penguin Press, 2025).
5. Draper, Kevin, “*Vince McMahon Cuts W.W.E. Ties After Sex Trafficking Accusation*,” the **New York Times** (Jan. 26, 2024) available at [Vince McMahon Cuts W.W.E. Ties After Sex Trafficking Accusation - The New York Times](#) accessed October 12, 2025.
6. Suskind, Ron, “*Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush*” in **The New York Times Magazine** (October 17, 2004) available at [Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush - The New York Times](#) accessed November 17, 2024.
7. For a more complete discussion of this see **Book Note** #28 “*Mediated America Part Two: Who Was Marshall McLuhan & What Did He Say?*” available [Roth Book Notes--McLuhan.pdf](#) accessed October 12, 2025.
8. Washburn, Kaitlin and Casey He, “*Runners and their cheerleaders turn out for Chicago Marathon: ‘This is our Super Bowl,’*” in **Chicago Sun Times** (Oct. 12, 2025) available at [Runners and their cheerleaders turn out for Chicago Marathon: ‘This is our Super Bowl’ - Chicago Sun-Times](#) accessed October 18, 2025.

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