**THE PERFECT DRUG: OUR MODERN-DAY “SOMA” AND THE INTELLECTUAL DECLINE OF AMERICA**

by the RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

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*“Two thousand pharmacologists and bio-chemists were subsidized. Six years later it was being produced commercially. The perfect drug. Euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant. All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects. Take a holiday from reality whenever you like, and come back without so much as a headache.”*
-Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

In 1932, Aldous Huxley published the chilling novel Brave New World. Full of dire predictions and sinister concepts, the novel has a tendency to strike a deep sense of foreboding and uneasiness. The picture of the future which Huxley paints for us stands in sharp contrast to other similar works to with which Brave New World is often compared. For example, while George Orwell’s 1984 portrays a dark, sinister regime in which the oppressed populous are controlled by propaganda, government surveillance, and most of all pain, Brave New World tells a story in which pleasure, not pain is used to control and manipulate. While Orwell feared a government which would hide the truth in order to maintain control; Huxley feared a world in which the truth would be shoved into obscurity by a sea of amusement and entertainment. According to Neil Postman in his book Amusing Ourselves to Death, “Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.” In today’s entertainment-centered world, it seems that perhaps Huxley, not Orwell, was right. Our culture is not controlled by censorship, but by pleasure.

Although it may sound far-fetched and conspiratorial, I believe that television has assumed the qualities of an addictive drug, reducing our capacities to think rationally, and also altering the way we view reality and perceive the significance of information.

There are many chilling parallels between the picture of the world Huxley paints in Brave New World and our world today. In Huxley’s world, the population of the earth is permanently limited to two billion humans. The idea of the family is considered “pornographic” in Huxley’s world, with the state responsible for raising (and producing) children. Women are instructed to use contraceptives or have abortions to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Sexual promiscuity is encouraged; anyone who does not engage in promiscuous sex is looked down on as being anti-social. Parenthood, marriage, natural birth and pregnancy are all considered obscene. The idea of wanting to be an individual, or to spend time alone, is horrifying in the new society. People’s needs for solitude and spiritual communion are fulfilled with the use of “soma,” a ubiquitous, universally consumed hallucinogenic drug which takes users on enjoyable “holidays” from reality, with no hangover or otherwise negative after-effects (Orwell).

Although many of the characteristics of Huxley’s society can be seen in America today, perhaps most disturbing is our modern-day equivalent of “soma.” Our soma takes a different form than it did in Huxley’s world, but the results are strikingly similar. Our soma is ever enjoyable, never failing to induce a state of mindless pleasure. It allows its users to enter a nearly hypnotized state for multiple hours a day with no noticeable hangover. It is a constant source of companionship and comfort for nearly every American, fulfilling many if not most of our spiritual and emotional needs. Like soma, our modern-day equivalent is capable of altering thoughts and feelings and has the capacity to render its users nearly incapable of rational thought. Our modern day equivalent of soma is not so obvious as a drug, however. Our soma is not administered in a powder or by injection, but rather as a pattern of electromagnetic waves transferred to those small, unthreatening boxes which occupy a space in the living rooms of nearly every American family. Our soma is none other than the technological marvel of the 20th century: the television.

It may seem rather alarmist and Luddite to condemn the television as a drug on par with soma. How on earth could something as ubiquitous and seemingly harmless as the television be as bad as all that? The proposition that a large majority of humanity has been duped into whittling away their ability for rational thought in exchange for brief moments of entertainment sounds more like a cheap conspiracy theory than a serious proposal. However, if we critically analyze the content and nature of television and compare it to Orwell’s fictional hallucinogen, I believe it will become than evident that this is no exaggeration.

A study done in 1990 showed that the average person watched about two hours of television per day, while the set is typically on about eight hours per day (Horvath). More recently, a study performed by the Nielsen Group found that on average, Americans spend five hours and eleven minutes per day, or about 36 hours per week in front of the tube, watching either live broadcasts, recorded broadcasts or DVDs, or else playing video games (Nielsen). The only two activities which top television in terms of hours spent per day are sleeping and working. Watching television is the only socially acceptable activity in which one sits silently for hours on end, in a state of brain activity lower than that of a person staring at a blank wall. Television, whether by design or accident, is essentially a means of mass hypnosis, in which the participants willingly subject themselves to a prolonged period of temporary mental retardation (Krugman). The only other activity comparable to television in this sense is recreational drug usage.

Of course, one of the most important delineating factors between drugs and other commonly consumed products is the addictiveness of the substance. So to determine whether television is really comparable to drugs, it is helpful to examine the addictive nature of TV. The American Dictionary of the English Language defines “addict” as “to apply one’s self habitually; to devote time and attention by customary or constant practice” (Webster). While a scientific analysis of television as an addictive substance is difficult at best, and presents a variety of problems to researchers, sufficient studies have been performed which at least seem to indicate that television is psychologically equivalent to an addictive drug., in the few studies which have been performed, there are interesting results. One study showed that television meets the American Psychological Association’s qualifications as an addictive substance. In the study, the researchers adapted a method originally developed to measure alcohol dependence for use in measuring addiction to television. They found that although television is not chemically addictive, it is still capable of addicting its users (Horvath). Another study performed in 1998 found that roughly 70% of respondents believed that television was addictive: 10% of participants in the study where self-proclaimed television addicts. Based on these results, it seems it would not be an unfair assumption to say that more than 10% of people are addicted to television. Furthermore, most addicts are usually unwilling to admit their addiction, so the 10% of respondents who admitted addiction were likely only a slice of the total number of television addicts (McIlwraith). Additionally, the number of hours watched per day has grown significantly since 1998, which could possibly indicate that the number of people who would consider themselves television “addicts” has likely increased since this study was done. Although there is an understandable lack of rigorous academic studies on the topic of television addiction, it seems reasonable to state that television is addictive, and that there is a significant percentage of the population addicted to television.

To condemn television on the basis that the results of using it are similar to the results of drug usage would be rather naïve and simplistic. After all, simply because something has drug-like qualities does not mean it is necessarily a bad thing. Caffeine is widely viewed to be a recreational drug to which a large percentage of our population is addicted. Yet despite this fact, there is no public outcry against caffeine, largely because it is not known to cause serious problems to one’s health. A similar argument could be made about television. Although television does have drug-like qualities, one could argue that the similarities between drugs and television stop short of the negative effects of drugs. After all, television is not known to be detrimental to a person’s health (at least, not conclusively), and there are no known lasting side effects. It is worth noting that there are some common health problems associated with excessive television watching (for example, obesity), but these problems are not caused directly by television itself. Rather they are a symptom of habits which tend to accompany television viewing. In essence then, television is like a drug, without any of the bad side effects. Television relieves stress and anxiety, allowing its viewers to “take a holiday from reality

Far more dangerous to society is the capacity of television to handicap a person’s ability for rational thought. In his book Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman argues that television as a medium is far more conducive to entertainment than to exposition. According to Postman, the printed word encourages critical, rational thought, while television encourages the exact opposite. An idea that is printed and published is open for analysis and critique. It remains, static and unmoving, on a page for anyone who wants to read, read, and reread it. Postman argues that a culture whose primary media is the printed word is a culture predisposed towards rational thought.

Postman writes: “In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content. It is no accident that the Age of Reason was coexistent with the growth of print culture, first in Europe and then in America.”

On the other hand, television as a means of communication has exactly the opposite effect of the printed word. In other words, while printing as a means of communication encourages rational thought, television discourages it. In the world of television, only the entertaining, attention grabbing shows survive. One has only to spend a few minute surfing television channels to find that this is true. Even the commercials, which most people regard as an annoyance, are visually and audibly pleasing. Perhaps the only television which would not be considered entertainment is C-SPAN, which is watched regularly by only about five percent of the population (Sanford). These numbers are small compared to the numbers for even a modestly successful television show, and when one remembers that C-SPAN is aired 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as opposed to the one hour per week of air time most television shows receive, the numbers look even worse for C-SPAN. It is no accident that the one program on television which consists strictly of educational, informative content with almost no entertainment value is one of the least watched programs on TV.

To say that television is entertaining does not really encompass its effects on society, however. Entertainment in itself is not a bad thing. The problem with television is not so much that it is entertaining, but that it forces into obscurity any form of communication which is not entertaining. This phenomenon can be seen in politics, religion, and education, just to name a few, especially when viewed from a historical perspective.

On October 16th, 1854, the citizens of Peoria, Illinois gathered for a debate between two famous men: Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. The debate began with a three hour speech from Douglass to which Lincoln was to respond. When it was Lincoln’s turn to speak, he reminded the audience that it was already 5:00 PM. He informed his audience that he would need at least three hours to respond to Douglas’s speech, and suggested that the audience go home, eat dinner, and come back for the rest of the debate. The audience amiably agreed, left, and returned to hear another four hours of speaking (Postman).

This short story is an illustration of what was considered “normal” for a debate between politicians in the 1800s. In today’s culture, by comparison, anything that lasts longer than two hours is considered to be unreasonably lengthy. It is rare that a politician makes a speech over an hour in length. And every televised speech is necessarily accompanied by flashy, spinning graphics, animated waving American flags and flashy “Decision: 2010” graphics. This shift in focus from the content of the message to presentation is the effect that television has had, not just on American politics, but on society as a whole. Because television is conducive only to entertainment, anything of value must be entertaining. Education is another example of the entertainment mentality of today’s society. A teacher is not considered “good” unless he or she is entertaining. Learning has to be “fun” in order to entice students into wanting to be educated. These facts may seem underwhelming, but compared to the intellectual state of America in the 18th and 19th centuries, they are seriously condemning. Imagine how an eighteenth century child from a middle class family would laugh at the idea that education must be accompanied by fun puppets, catchy songs, and clever graphics in order to be worth-while. This is the result of television’s influence on society. The fundamental value of information is not judged based on content, but on entertainment value.

The dangers of an entertainment centric culture are many. Entertainment is almost always trivial and unimportant, and generally has no lasting significance. One might argue that a work of entertainment can convey deep meaning and have a lasting cultural significance. Admittedly, no one familiar with The Odyssey would write off the epic as a mere trivial bit of entertainment for the ancient Greek’s amusement. However, in today’s culture, entertainment is primarily designed to amuse rather than instruct or inform or inspire. So when news, politics or religion, take the form of entertainment, they usually become light, trivial, and devoid of genuine seriousness and meaning.

Televised news is a prime example of how even the most dire, catastrophic events are presented primarily for the amusement of the viewer. When a tragedy is depicted on national television, how often do the newscasters suggest a few minutes of silence with a blank screen for viewers to reflect on the tragedy? More to the point, why would newscasters do something so outrageous, knowing that the moment they temporarily cut transmission, the viewing audience would switch to the next channel to get more vivid, eye-popping footage accompanied by smooth, flowing dialogue from attractive anchors? Producers know that television shows must be light, amusing, and trivial in order to sell. And so those producers, who are far from stupid, are happy to oblige. Neil Postman accurately summarizes the situation:

“Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to ‘join them tomorrow.’ What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters’ invitation because we know that the ‘news’ is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say. Everything about a news show tells us this—the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage—all these and more suggest that what we have just seen is no cause for weeping. A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis.”

Of course, one can hardly condemn newscasters or producers of such television. Only an idiot, or else a non-profit cooperation with external funding, would produce a television show designed to do anything but amuse the audience. It is not as though the producers are not intelligent enough to create a truly intellectual program. On the contrary, to produce news that is not entertaining would be the unintelligent thing to do. The problem lies not with the newscasters but with the medium itself. Television, particularly commercial television, is simply not conducive to messages which do not amuse and entertain. But this medium, which in itself seems harmless, has lead to the trivialization of truly important information, along with the gradual decline in intellectual ability of its viewers.

A common fear expressed by many 20th century writers is that the government will try to control people by censoring books and other forms of communication, and intellectuals feared that the banning or censoring of books and other media would result in the death of rational thought. This fear is embodied in George Orwell’s Brave New World. One look at communist China or Russia is enough to demonstrate that the censorship of information is a serious threat to freedom and civil liberty. But there is another equally chilling, while somewhat less obvious threat. As Aldous Huxley put it in Brave New World Revisited, those who are ever alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In Orwell’s world, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Huxley’s world, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In Orwell’s world, information is censored. In Huxley’s world, there is no need to censor information; it is drowned in a sea of irrelevant amusement. I believe that Huxley’s prediction of the future, not Orwell’s, was more accurate.

The difference between Orwell’s and Huxley’s envisioned destruction of humanity is something like the difference between a stick of dynamite and a flowing river. Both are capable of destruction, but in two very different ways. One is un-ignorable; the effects of the other are barely perceivable. But both can carve a chasm hundreds of feet deep. This is the difference between Orwell’s and Huxley’s predictions of the future. A government which rules by oppression is obvious, powerful, and destructive, but it can be resisted. No matter how absolutely a government controls its subjects, it cannot control their wills. But control through pleasure is much more difficult to identify or resist. There is no regime to fight, no dictators to oppose, no tyranny against which to rebel. There is only the slow, persistent, almost imperceptible erosion of the ability to think and critically analyze ideas. Such an assault against rational thought is difficult, if not impossible to combat. One might suggest that the problem could be solved by banning or regulating television, either forcing it to conform to some sort of standard or else prohibiting it all together. But government censorship would only move the country toward a different set of problems, the sort predicted by Orwell.. This was the message which Huxley was trying to convey in Brave New World. Entertainment in itself is not bad. The problem comes not when we start laughing instead of thinking, but when we forget why we’re laughing and when we stopped thinking.