

# Amusing ourselves to death: How science and reason are losing their grip in public discourse

Bruce Hugman

Human affairs have never been primarily driven by reason, but for the last three centuries, we have made a good job of moderating our instinctive, irrational and chaotic urges through **humanistic values**, the **rational pursuit of truth** and the **scientific method**. Those centuries saw the most spectacular period of human development, along with some of the greatest injustices and disasters in history.

The fragile fabric of **civilized living and global co-operation are now under threat** from multiple sources rising from the behavior and example of global leaders, the arrogance of élites, the greed of commerce, the corruption of institutions, and the behaviour and choices of individuals. Great numbers of **our fellow humans are alienated, excluded, disempowered, resentful and fearful**.

**Facts, evidence and science are under constant attack**; emotion, prejudice, self-interest, politics and superstition rule the day. These processes have deep roots in the political, economic and social arrangements of the world; they are manifestations of failures in leadership, policy, inclusion, justice and morality. Social media amplify the problems at every turn. The remedies go well beyond the domain of science, but we can make a start on territory we know well, in the field of patient safety.

We must realise that **there is popular (and democratically expressed) hostility to the old order**, of which the author of this poster and most of his readers are representatives. We are fighting a rear-guard action for values that are not welcome or popular in 2018. It requires **humility, empathy, patience and persistence** to respond productively.

In pharmacovigilance, in science and medicine generally, we must constantly monitor the external world and our own performance; **we must defend precious ideals**, assert what is known, how it is known and why it matters. We must avoid the appearance of bias, arrogance, exclusivity or pedagogy. We must be as creative, clever and energetic as the forces of darkness.



## The major threats

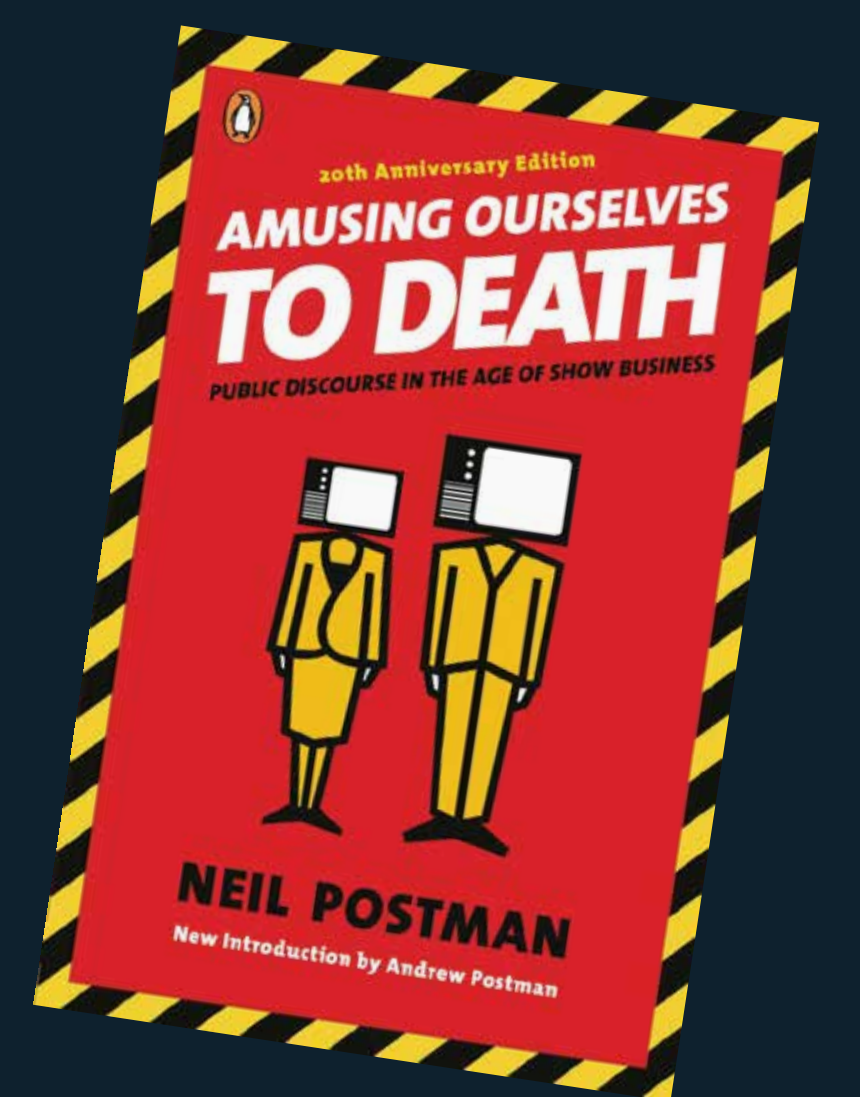
## Some remedies at macro and micro levels

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| <b>The rise of democratically-expressed popular hostility to Enlightenment values</b>   | Acknowledge the justice and authenticity of much popular sentiment; <b>humility</b> in relation to the failures of empathy and policy of the privileged classes; embody the <b>human, emotional dimensions</b> in relationships, data and communications; demonstrate benefits of humane rationality and compassion |
| <b>The assault on truth</b>   | Defence of the ideal of the <i>best current representation of reality</i> , pursued through reason and science; persistent <b>assertion of the clarity of facts</b> in contrast to fiction, stories, myths, beliefs and opinion   |
| <b>Proliferation of fake news, lies and disinformation</b>                              | Constant monitoring and lively, inventive, <b>impartial rebuttal</b> ; demonstrating how ideology (including our own) affects perception of reality   |
| <b>Binary choices</b>   | Illumination of complexity and <b>promotion of variability</b> and the dimensions/spectra of reality  |
| <b>Algorithmic capture of human will and choice</b>                                     | Deconstruct <b>hacking of the human brain</b> ; expose and illuminate the perils of big data held by governments and corporations; expose biases in AI; encourage <b>skepticism</b> and discriminating <b>resistance</b>  |
| <b>Polarisation, tribalism, partisanship</b>  | Reach out on the grounds of <b>common humanity and shared concerns and threats</b> ; pay attention to alienation, vulnerability, fear; resist labeling and name-calling; form alliances   |
| <b>Show-business, entertainment, short attention spans, trivialisation</b>              | Deconstruction, <b>exposure and resistance</b> ; itemise losses; satire; education; demonstrate seriousness   |
| <b>Charismatic leaders</b>  | <b>Critical appraisal and meticulous deconstruction</b> ; focus on outcomes and conspicuous harms; investigate reasons for popularity and the pain and aspirations underlying it  |
| <b>Suspicion of data and statistics</b>   | Admission of how misleading, oppressive and unrepresentative they can be; <b>promotion of rational, neutral and humane use</b> ; value and prioritize individual variation and experience   |
| <b>Hostility to experts and evidence</b>  | Re-establish the integrity of genuine expertise, data and evidence that have no political contamination. Persistently <b>fly the flag for accuracy and evidence</b> ; expose charlatans   |
| <b>Snake-oil, homeopathy, unproven natural remedies, fraudulent science, charlatans</b> | Corral and protect integrity of <b>gold-standard data and evidence-based medicine</b> ; respect freedom of choice with clear, best-evidence caveats   |
| <b>Science deniers</b>  | Get under skin of motivation; <b>disaggregate personal and political</b> ; connect with fears; assert facts and tell stories  |
| <b>Loss of empathy</b>  | A radical culture of listening, attention, respect; <b>engagement and collaboration</b> ; admission of distance, neglect and ignorance of élites  |
| <b>Social media</b>   | Acknowledge (celebrate) the revolution; encourage <b>critical understanding of benefits and harms</b> ; analysis, infiltration and exploitation   |

Educate children and adults in the nature, benefits and hazards of the jungle they love; help them avoid the greatest risks to their freedom and mental health

## A note on Neil Postman

Influential social theorist and critic, he was a New York University professor for forty years; he published extensively and had a considerable reputation as teacher and thinker. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was first published in 1985 and was widely read and translated. His prescient thinking and insight also throw brilliant light on the media revolution of the new century. This poster took its initial inspiration from him and builds on his thinking, for the current age.



...Orwell [1984] feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley [Brave New World] feared that what we love will ruin us. [p.xx]

Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death. [p.4]

Epistemology is ... concerned with the origins and nature of knowledge. ... definitions of truth are derived, at least in part, from the character of the media of communication through which information is conveyed. [p.17]

The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence and incoherence. [p.65]

The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining... [p.87]


But what we watch is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment. [p.141]

...in the end, [Huxley] was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in Brave New World, was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing at and why they had stopped thinking. [p.163]

## The thinking and research for this poster rely much on a range of eclectic resources, including:

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*; Julian Baggini, *The Edge of Reason*; Any Chua, *Political Tribes*; Evan Davis, *Post Truth*; William Davis, *Nervous States; How Feeling took over the World*; Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Sapiens and 21 Lessons for the 21st Century*; Keith Kahn-Harris, *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*; Michiko Kakutani, *The death of truth: how we gave up on facts and ended up with Trump*; Brian King, *The Lying Ape*; Hector Macdonald, *Truth*; Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*; Tom Nicholls, *The Death of Expertise*; Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*; Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Skin in the Game*, and from an extensive examination of journalism in *The Guardian* and other major printed and video media.

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