

Looks Like Entertainment

Thoughts on New Media and Big Ideas

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Since John Abbott and Heather MacTaggart completed the pre-publication edition of *Overschooled but Undereducated: Society's Failure to Understand Adolescence* the Initiative has been involved in the process of trying to market the book in various mediums. Educationalists, scientists, religious leaders, thinkers, and business people have thrown their support behind the book. Words of praise fill Initiative inboxes, and testimonials to the strength of book's essential message appear weekly on the website. *This book must be read! Essential reading! You'll have no problem finding a publisher with material like this! Excellent stuff!* But the response from major publishers has been very different. While they generally support the ideas in *Overschooled but Undereducated*, and recognise the importance of such a public discussion taking place, their interest goes no further. They cannot publish the book, for there is *supposedly* not a market for it.

The Initiative believes that television could be the ultimate medium for disseminating the ideas in *Overschooled but Undereducated*: immediately accessible to millions and purpose-built for the visual, sweeping history of human ingenuity and learning that the book trumpets and defends. One of a number of people John Abbott approached regarding the feasibility of transforming the book into a series of television programmes was Sir Robert Winston, involved himself in programmes concerned with human learning and child development. *It's a great idea*, he said, *and you certainly have my support, but you'll have difficulty finding anyone to produce it. Broadcasters do what the controllers tell them to do and controllers aren't interested in big ideas or shaping public opinion.*

Two mediums, two similar sorts of caveat and rejection. While being admittedly biased in my opinions, *Overschooled but Undereducated* is an incredible achievement. Massive in it's scope and agenda, filled with stories and anecdotes and structured in an arc that takes in much of history, it is a book that given the right publisher and an aggressive, creative marketing strategy, could be catapulted towards the front of bookshops and into the front of public discussion and consciousness. It's one of *those* kinds of books. So why aren't the publishers lined up outside our door?

Such questions seem to cling to discussions surrounding the promotion of big ideas, and the Initiative is hardly the first organisation or individual to feel that it has an important message that isn't being properly heard or represented. So the question lingers. It has been further prompted by my reading of Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* about the trivialising effects that television has had on public discourse. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was written in 1985 and has the feel of a book that was probably ahead of its time at the time of publication but is not slightly behind 20 years later; its relevance has expired. In 1985 there was no worldwide web, and although computers were in classrooms, administrators were probably still unsure as to what kind of an impact they could have on educating young people. For these reasons a straight review of a book that seems anachronistic is a futile exercise, but *Amusing Ourselves to Death* still raises some pretty fundamental questions about how public discourse should be maintained and how we might best promote the big ideas of the day. Postman also makes the vital argument in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that we have become a culture of entertainment rather than of serious discourse by inviting televisions - the unfailing, glowing light in our front rooms - into our lives to the extent that we have. It is not the junk on TV, but the attempt

television makes at serious discussion that so offends Postman. By its very nature as a purveyor of images and sound - by its essence as a medium - television was best built for entertainment.

It would be easy to conclude from Postman's book and associated arguments made in the 20-plus years since it was first published, that society has become dumbed-down by television and that no one wants to hear about the big issues anymore. This is over simplistic. There are plenty of reasons in the 21st century to believe that public discourse is still very much alive and well. It would be interesting to know, for example, what Postman thinks of the internet, particularly public forums and blogs: forms of discourse that are democratic in their essence and almost universally accessible - you only need an internet connection to join in.

Let us follow Postman's argument through: we are now 23 years further into *thinking in terms of television*. In the 23 years since his book was first published each of us has seen well over half a million adverts, and spent years watching television. We are 23 years *more television-orientated*. What does this mean? It means we take our news in disconnected segments. In the programmes we love to watch camera shots last no more than a few seconds before fading or switching somewhere else. Music constantly accompanies ever-changing images and we switch on and off without consequence. News anchors tell us about brutal murders, and only seconds later we are receiving the latest sports results. We miss one programme but have no problem catching up the next time because television *includes*. All of these *innate* attributes of television effect our capacity to think or argue in more complex terms, over longer periods.

In some ways, blogs are a perfect extension of the television mindset. Usually short in format, usually (but not necessarily) disconnected from the previous/next post, and usually written in casual, informal language with images and sometimes moving pictures or sound to accompany the text. While there are a number of prominent *serious* blogs (*The Huffington Post*, most national newspapers) the majority are generally treated as repositories for trivial (but not useless) information. There is no inherent problem with this, but it is an interesting development in the mirroring of the television mindset Postman warned us about over 20 years ago. And the fact is, many of us read these blogs as sources of news. They are our main window onto the world; followed by television. Followed by newspapers (which are becoming increasingly glossy, increasingly, internet-based, increasingly "bloggy" and often with printed links to internet-based follow-up) followed by printed paper in the forms of magazines, journals and books.

I am a fan of the new media. I have been keeping a blog for three years when I could never keep a diary for more than a month. As a visual artist, my words are often accompanied by images. The opportunity to link in video, music and to share links from across the world, across disciplines, media and opinion is my privilege as a member of the age of new media. There are undeniable benefits to operating in such an age. But there are surely downsides, that appear to be linked with the problems Postman describes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The worst case outcome of such a disjointed way of imbibing information is that when a sustained, intellectual, and sequential argument comes along most people don't know how to deal with it, let alone join in. More severely, as serious news and information is so often served up in an entertaining format (scrolling text, dramatic music, and by hair-sprayed anchors and let's face it, although the American Fox News may be the worse, the BBC is not free from such adornments) serious, sustained arguments are in danger of being ignored altogether. It may be true that many of us can regurgitate the latest headlines, but how many of us really know what has caused the credit crunch, the historical basis for the crisis between Russia and Georgia or even the differences in policy between Barack Obama and John McCain.

The phenomenal rise of Barack Obama is an interesting example of how we as a society understand the world around us and present issues. A few months ago, as the Primary race between Clinton and Obama was hotting up, I found myself more and more drawn to Obama. One of the major reasons has little to do with his credentials or his policies, but is *graphical*, and more specifically *typographical*. I realised that the Obama campaign team were running a *visually* spectacular campaign and it was

all summed up in the typeface they had chosen to accompany Obama on banners, placards, website, and probably even campaign team business cards. *Gotham* was designed by Tobias Frere-Jones and represents a solid, futuristic and cosmopolitan outlook. The word CHANGE, so often printed above or below Obama as he speaks in town halls, universities and squares across America is made *believable* by the typeface that spells it out, and we don't have to be typographical experts to be effected. The subtleties in the art of typography and design are understood by us all, which is why visual marketing can be so effective. But Obama's team have dug deep. Visit his website and take a look at how carefully crafted it is, with blends and tones in the background and a general warm, fuzzy, almost otherworldly feel. It is comforting to browse. And there is Gotham all over the place. Now visit McCain's and it is a totally different prospect: the tone is unmistakably military. From the star above his name, to the clunkiness of the design. His website is down-home and hard, like McCain: Obama's is intelligent and representative of some kind of utopian future, like Obama himself.

These observations are obvious in many ways, but they say so much about how we now understand and take in our world: in a primarily *visual* way. And all the symbols, all the keys, have to be right – have to be *on message* – before we will believe any of it. Obama says he represents change, but we *believe* it because everything about him looks like change. Some Americans might not vote for McCain because he, and his visual entourage of signs, symbols and gestures *look* like more of the same. I do not mean to detract from either candidate's message, I am simply suggesting that we understand each candidate's message primarily by way of visual associations and not necessarily by what we hear or read they say.

So back to the conundrum: how do big ideas get heard? I cannot answer the question, but I can hazard a number of serious guesses. As the Initiative continues to push for both the publication of *Overschooled but Undereducated* and the production of a series of television programs we will necessarily have to accept the fact that we must embrace the tenets of new media to find any kind of mainstream success. Our message must be exciting, our visuals stunning and fast moving. We must lose words and reduce the lengths of our paragraphs. We must find a recognisable face to sell it all and find a score to accompany the message, ramming it home, coaxing viewers into a sensory form of understanding. It is not so much that our society suffers from being dumbed-down, it is more that we have become attuned to particular ways of understanding knowledge and information, and that the structure of understanding provided by the printed word that spread and deepened our knowledge from Guttenberg in the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th has been transposed by a new medium that places entertainment before discussion, and amusement before understanding. There is still plenty of scope for serious discussion, and a place for a scholarly text or academic article, but the Initiative's message needs a hook to hang on, and that hook may need to *look like* entertainment.