

#1466 The Faustian Bargain of Technological Advancement and Societal Degradation

Intro 1-15-22

[00:00:00] **JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** During today's show, I'm going to be telling you about a podcast I think you should be checking out: it's called *Majority 54*. So hear me out mid show when I tell you all about it.

And now, welcome to this episode of the award-winning *Best of the Left* podcast, in which we shall take a look at the trade-offs that are becoming ever more evident between the advancement of mass communication and social media technologies, and the ways in which those advancements contribute to the degradation of social cohesion. And I want to let you know that there are two clips in the show today from the mid nineties. You'll be able to tell which those are because they sound like they're from the nineties, they make references to things like "cyberspace" and the "information superhighway",

so no, those aren't just really out of date terms, they're really out of date clips. But, they are all the more impressive to be heard today for their age. Whereas the first clip we're going to hear is less obvious. It's from 2006 -- a very special year, by the way, the year Twitter was founded. The year Google bought YouTube. The year Facebook introduced their news feed feature. And the year *Best of the Left* was launched. Three events that have been threatening to destabilize society ever since, and one that has been working to undo the damage. I'll let you guess which is which on those.

So as you hear this first clip, just know that none of those de-stabilizing events were even on the radar yet, but the discussion still couldn't be more relevant to today.

So clips today are from *On The Media*, *C-SPAN Book TV*, *Future Tense*, *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, and *Land of the Giants*.

Re-musing Ourselves - On the Media - Air Date 3-3-06

[00:01:50] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** The late media critic Neil Postman argued in his seminal book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that as TV prevailed over the printed word, it impaired our ability to make sense of a world of information. He observed that there was no subject so serious, be it war or faith, or the future of the nation, that it could not be reduced to tasty, if incoherent, info bites. Exhibit A was the nightly news, which he said featured, quote, "a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction." He went on, "In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism, in philosophy, nihilism, in psychiatry, schizophrenia. In the parlance of the theater, it is known as vaudeville." Jay Rosen writes the blog PressThink.org and is a professor in the Journalism Department of New York University, where Postman taught. Rosen counts Postman as both mentor and hero, and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, now in a new edition, as ever more relevant. He says Postman never wavered in his belief in the superiority of the printed word.

[00:02:58] **JAY ROSEN:** It was in print that we learned how to make an argument cohere. It was in print that we learned that we could classify what we know, and therefore make it available to us in a convenient way. And it was through print that we learned how to sustain an idea, sustain an argument over a long stretch of mental time, so that our descriptions of the world could be as complex and nuanced as the world that we found out there. And as we moved from an oral to a writing to a print culture, Postman saw human intelligence and human character improving up to a point. And then a reversal began.
[LAUGHS]

[00:03:41] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Now, the improvement that you're talking about is an increased emphasis on rationality.

[00:03:46] **JAY ROSEN:** Mm-hmm [AFFIRMATIVE] .

[00:03:47] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Postman talks about how changing technologies changed our relationship with what we call news.

[00:03:55] **JAY ROSEN:** In the era of newspapers, the information available to people was very connected to things they had to do. The original newspapers were meant for the trading classes, people who had decisions to make. The kind of news they learned about and the kind of life they led matched in some way. That lasted up until the mid-19th century. And what he says in the 20th century is that it's completely out of whack.

[00:04:25] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** News from everywhere -

[00:04:26] **JAY ROSEN:** Mm-hmm. [AFFIRMATIVE]

[00:04:27] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** - in which no action is called for.

[00:04:29] **JAY ROSEN:** Well, Neil has a very wonderful phrase for this. He says that information began to come to us that answered no question we had asked. And I think that puts it very, very well. The thing about the mass media and their reach across the globe is that they can furnish us with episodes [LAUGHS] and eruptions that don't have any necessary connection to our lives but might connect to us as human drama - or, as we sometimes say, pure entertainment.

[00:05:02] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Okay. So that brings us to the nightly news. News has now become nuggets, he felt, that had little relevance to us, that we can't act on.

[00:05:09] **JAY ROSEN:** Right.

[00:05:10] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** And he dissects the classic news format, which we know hasn't changed, the content of it, the music of it, the anchors and their demeanor.

[00:05:18] **JAY ROSEN:** Yes. He paid attention, not to the things most critics write about - sound bites, inaccuracies, sensationalism - but to these other very small things. Like the music that sets the tone for the news has this enormous influence on sort of orienting us and telling us what kind of space we are in. He paid attention to the lead-ins and the intersections of one segment and another, because in those moments of transition, television gave us its idea of how things were related to one another.

[00:05:50] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Or not.

[00:05:50] **JAY ROSEN:** Or not. That's why he made such a big deal, I think, properly, over the phrase "and now this."

[00:05:57] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** As he wrote, "There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly, for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report

so threatening that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, 'Now this.'"

[00:06:13] **JAY ROSEN:** When he looked to television, what he saw was no ethic of care whatsoever about the order or depth or meaning of each piece of [CHUCKLES] data or image or segment that came through. And there was something about that, just the sheer randomness of it, that he saw as a kind of violence against us.

[00:06:39] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Now Jay, the name of your blog, PressThink, is a word George Orwell might have coined. In fact, in the forward to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman says that we shouldn't be afraid of Orwell's dark vision of the world, as expressed in the novel *1984*. What we should fear, actually, is Aldous Huxley's dark vision, as expressed in *Brave New World*. So what's the distinction that he was trying to draw here?

[00:07:05] **JAY ROSEN:** Neil was very concerned about how we lose things that are precious to us, including our freedoms. And these two books presented two different ways that could happen. It was Orwell's [CHUCKLES] view that people could be controlled through power and coercion and intimidation, confusing their minds and getting them to accept lies. In *Brave New World*, people are not denied things. They're given whatever they [LAUGHS] want on the principle that pleasure is good, and why shouldn't we occupy ourselves with the things that bring us joy and sensation? It was Huxley's view that people could be controlled that way. Huxley thought he was describing something potential in the world and Neil thought he was describing [CHUCKLES] something that had arrived and was here.

Neil Postman Technopoly - C-Span Book TV - Air Date 7-10-92

[00:08:00] **BRIAN LAMB -HOST, BOOK TV:** Neil Postman, author of *"Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology"*. What's your book all about?

[00:08:13] **NEIL POSTMAN:** The tendency in American culture to turn over to technology sovereignty, command, control over all of our social institutions. In other words, the book is about how America has developed a new religion, as it were, and the religion is its faith in that human progress and technological

innovation are the same thing and that paradise can be achieved through greater and greater commitment to technology.

[00:08:55] **BRIAN LAMB -HOST, BOOK TV:** What is technology?

[00:08:57] **NEIL POSTMAN:** I had to define it in the book rather broadly because not only do I include machinery like television and computers and all of that, but also techniques. I call them invisible technologies because most people don't think of them as a sort of machinery -- things like statistics and polling and bureaucratic forms -- any systematic and repeatable technique that tends to cause people to constrain their thinking about the world.

[00:09:44] **BRIAN LAMB -HOST, BOOK TV:** We talked a number of years ago about television. What impact is technology having on television, and what's the impact on the country?

[00:09:56] **NEIL POSTMAN:** One of the reasons, Brian, that I felt I did this book is that the last time we talked, as you suggest, it was about a book that was almost wholly devoted to television. When I started to think about that issue, I realized that you couldn't get an accurate handle on what we Americans were all about by focusing on one medium, that you had to see television as part of a kind of a system of techniques and technologies that are giving the shape to our culture. For instance, if one wants to think about what has happened to public life in America, one has to think, of course, first about television, but also about CDs and also about faxes and telephones and all of the machinery that takes people out of public arenas and keeps them fixed in their homes so that we have a kind of privatization of American life.

One hears people say with some considerable enthusiasm that in the future, putting television, computers and the telephone together, people will be able to shop at home, vote at home, express political preferences in many ways at home so that they never have to go out in the street at all and never have to meet their fellow citizens in any context because we'd have this ensemble of technologies that keep us private, away from citizens. In fact, I think Ross Perot's idea of a town meeting is a new kind of definition of town meeting because it doesn't imply co-presence of people. He wants to do it via electronic media, so that television as well as other technologies redefine all sorts of things.

I mean, television has redefined -- as, I think, we talked about last time -- what we mean by a public debate. We used to use the Lincoln-Douglas debates as an example, as a kind of model or metaphor of what we mean by political debate. These debates would go on for hours. Television has redefined it, so now the

two or possibly three candidates stand in front of the television camera and each one is given two minutes to respond to a very difficult question, and the opponent is given 60 seconds to reply. Now, we still call this a debate, but it's a redefinition of that term. Ross Perot's suggestion that we use television as a form of a town meeting is another redefinition of what we once meant by town meeting. So one of the most interesting things about technology is that it redefines our language. It gives us different meanings of older words, and very often we're not quite as aware as we should be of how that process is working.

[00:13:48] **BRIAN LAMB -HOST, BOOK TV:** Good or bad?

[00:13:50] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Well, in this book I mostly emphasize the bad part. I've done that in most of my books. But I admit happily at the beginning of the book that anyone who looks at technology as an either-or development -- that is, either all good or all bad -- is making a mistake. All technological change is what I call a Faustian bargain. It gives you something, but it also taketh away something.

Now, in America -- and this is one of the reasons I thought I should write this book -- we tend to be extremely enthusiastic about technology, about what it is going to bring us, so that almost every American, in considering anything from lasers to computers to television, can tell you for a half hour or more what this new technology will do for us. But there are very few people who have ever considered what a new technology will undo. So I wrote my book from the point of view of what it will undo; how it will change and has changed for the worse some of our social institutions and psychic habits. But this doesn't mean that I'm unaware of the positive possibilities of some of the new technologies.

[00:15:39] **BRIAN LAMB -HOST, BOOK TV:** You talk a lot about religion. What does the new technology do to religion?

[00:15:44] **NEIL POSTMAN:** I fear that our faith in technology has weakened a more traditional sense of spirituality. Technology implies a kind of rational -- or I should say, an emphasis on the rational because technologies work. See, that's the wonderful thing about them. Airplanes do fly and penicillin, I think, tends to make people better, and television does show you someone in some far-off place. So technology works in an unambiguous way -- in the way that prayer, for instance, or even faith in God doesn't always work.

I don't think all this began yesterday. In fact, in the book I try to show how beginning really in the 17th century, the faith that people had in a benign design in the world has weakened, and in our own century seems to have been replaced

almost in a religious sense by a faith in progress and progress through technology: we will reach heaven if we can produce bigger and better machinery and techniques. In fact, there are some people who even believe we can solve the problem of death through technology -- I think it's called cryogenics.

Prescient Predictions 1984; Brave New World; and Network Part 1- Future Tense - Air Date 7-7-19

[00:17:54] **ALDOUS HUXLEY:** Brave New World is a fantastic parable about the dehumanization of human beings. In the negative utopia described in my story, man has been subordinated to his own inventions: science technology...

[00:18:10] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** Aldous Huxley wrote his seminal work in the early 1930s, a decade and a half before the arrival of 1984.

It's also about a dystopian future world; but very different from that imagined by Orwell.

Huxley's world is one of much more subtle enforcement and enslavement; of rampant consumerism; and of endless distraction.

Many people believe that Brave New World was actually more accurate in predicting major elements of the world we live in today. Among them is Scott Stephens, editor of the ABCs, religion and ethics website, and also the co-host of The Minefield.

[00:18:48] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** Well, if you think about it for a moment, the great threat within 1984 is a threat that's entirely external to human society. So, it's the overweening, censorious, totalitarian state, that tells you what to think, that tells you what to believe, that manufactures the economy of information so that you only have... you know, you have a, you have a deracinated form of speech. You have certain official forms of history.

[00:19:12] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** Much like Maoist China.

[00:19:14] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** Exactly like Maoist China!

And here's where I think... what was really at work within Orwell's great novel was a fear of some of the tendencies that were emerging in the east, rather than a prediction of what... what in fact was looming in the west.

Huxley, I think, was far more attuned to the internal dynamics of Western culture. So for instance, in *Brave New World*, you don't have to suppress the truth. You don't need an overweening state to try to hide the way that things really are from its citizens. You just need to drown citizens in distraction.

Here's... again, Huxley had this remarkable way of describing what the media would become. He said the media would stop trading in information, and instead it would trade in sentiment.

So his vision of the future of television, for instance, was what he described as "the feelies." You tune in, you plug in, in order to feel in order, to be distracted.

[00:20:11] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** And that sense of constant distraction, I mean, that's one thing many of us talk about with regard to social media and our phones these days.

[00:20:18] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** That's exactly right. Huxley was the first to imagine something like an attention economy, where what people would want is a series of endless distractions from the worries and cares of everyday life.

And it's then the use of drugs, like Soma, which gives you a mild high, but the main purpose of it is, just, to distract you, in the same way as sex might, as the media might, as certain forms of extracurricular activity would.

[00:20:42] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** And this drug, Soma, in the novel, is it's required. People are obliged to take this drug. So, it's a way of keeping the population docile while they're also being distracted.

[00:20:53] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** That's exactly right. Soma takes the edges off; it takes off the highs, but it also takes off the low. So much so, that this total form of both psycho-pharmaceutical and social life has the effect of filling one's daily experience with an endless series of preoccupations with what is, fundamentally, irrelevant.

And here's where I think Huxley really enters into his own element: he saw the next frontier of capitalism's mode of Fordist production-- he saw the next frontier of that-- being the media itself. So, he refers... unlike totalitarian forms

of propaganda, he saw democracy as requiring its own form of capitalist propaganda, which is: you bury the truth in trivia, so that people no longer go looking for what is true amid the flotsam of the true, the trivial, and the manufactured.

[00:21:48] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** The big question, I suppose, is, why do we know so much about 1984? Why do we see that as the great prescient dystopian novel, and not appreciate, to the same extent, the work of Huxley with *Brave New World*?

[00:22:01] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** I think that's a wonderful question. Why is it that 1984 shot back to the top of the New York Times bestseller list in the three months following the election of Donald Trump? Why were new productions of, uh, 1984 suddenly being featured in playhouses and theaters all over the world?

The reason, I think, anthony is very, very, very simple. Ever since the late 1970s, part of the moral culture of the media has been to point to bad guys, to identify who's at fault; to tell you what they did wrong; to array their audience against the real culprits; and then to tell you what you ought to think of them, to enact forms of public moral judgments, in other words.

George Orwell fits neatly into that, because the threat in 1984 is all external, always external enemies. Whereas Aldous Huxley, he's saying, "We have been complicit in our own self-enslavement. We are the ones who bought into a culture of endless distraction. The fault, dear Brutus, lies not with our stars, but with ourselves."

And I think that's precisely what Huxley is doing. We are co-participants in our own position of cultural servitude.

[00:23:13] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** And it's easy to say why that's an uncomfortable proposition for people to take on.

[00:23:18] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** That's exactly right, because if you no longer rely on external sources for your sense of internal feeling, if you can no longer be reliant on this system of distractions to take you away from the worries and cares of everyday life, then it means it's time to grow up and become a fully functioning, properly engaged, democratic citizen.

[00:23:40] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** Orwell and Huxley were contemporaries weren't they? They knew each other personally. What was the connection there?

[00:23:46] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** Yeah, it's actually very funny, and people forget, because Brave New World sounds like such a contemporary book, that Brave New World was written in 1932, or it was published in 1932; orwell's book came much later.

Huxley, of course, was older than Orwell. He was Orwell's French teacher at Eaton college. It's a very, very strange, almost school masterly, relationship. Orwell was quite keen to get Huxley's approval of 1984. Uh, Huxley himself was quite approving of the book. He thought that there were some problems with Orwell's overall prose style. Uh, Huxley, in every way, was the better novelist.

This strange rivalry that people set up between Orwell and Huxley, as if they were warring cultural forces within their own times, that simply didn't exist.

[00:24:33] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** And it is there. I mean, if you Google Huxley and Orwell you'll find lots of articles about this, kind of, supposed rivalry between them.

[00:24:42] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** Like, a title fight between Orwell and Huxley. That simply didn't take place. Where it all comes from is a really interesting... but a single paragraph in a book by Neil Postman from 1988, from memory.

[00:24:53] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** Who was a media theorist.

[00:24:55] **SCOTT STEPHENS:** Who was a media theorist, and himself quite a good public philosopher.

It's a book called "Amusing Ourselves to Death," where he says something along the lines of what we've been talking about: Orwell envisaged a totalitarian future, that we would be an enslaved people; Huxley envisaged a trivial future, where we would become, essentially, a trivial and distracted people.

So that's where this rivalry comes from. I'm not saying that the rivalry isn't, in fact, there, but it's probably in the use that we are now making of Orwell's, work rather than any kind of actual friction between the two of them.

The Trouble With Reality - On The Media -

Air Date 5-17-17

[00:25:28] **BRIAN LEHRER - HOST, THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW:** You compare the two classic books, "1984" by George Orwell, and "Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley, through the lens of the late NYU media studies professor, Neil Postman. Both those books describe totalitarian worlds we could find ourselves in, but one of them struck Postman as more relevant to today. And I think struck you that way too. Will you take us there?

[00:25:53] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Sure, Absolutely. Uh, Postman was writing about this in his 1985 classic book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," which still has a great deal to teach us, even though it does precede the internet, and the impact of digital technology. Uh, and I think some of the things that he projects are off.

But in terms of the Orwell-Huxley comparison, here's what he wrote. He wrote:

"What Orwell feared were those who would ban books; what Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.

"Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information; Huxley feared those who would give us so much information, that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.

"Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us; Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.

"Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture; Huxley feared that we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with the equivalent of the 'feelies,' the 'orgy-porgy,' and the 'centrifical bumble-puppy.'

"In 1984, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain; in Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure.

"In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us; Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us."

[00:27:23] **BRIAN LEHRER - HOST, THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW:** Another reference from the book: you quote the English poet, John Milton--

most famous for "Paradise Lost"-- in a polemic against censorship to the British government in the 1700s [1640s], that inspired Thomas Jefferson. But I think you now find it naive.

[00:27:40] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Right. Yeah. Well, here's the thing: is that, what Milton said, and what Jefferson later echoed, was that, if you place truth in a battle with falsehood, truth will inevitably, will always, win. Milton believed that the people fundamentally grew wise with exposure to information. And Jefferson certainly believed this.

Now, not all the founding fathers did; Madison didn't really believe it, Hamilton certainly didn't.

And, uh, the fact is, that we know now that information does not lead to a higher truth. We create our worlds from the seen and the unseen; the seen are the facts, but until they are marinated in our traditions, and our values, until we place them into a narrative context that we agree with, all of those things, and we leave out the ones that don't fit, uh, information alone won't do it. Fact checking alone won't stop Trump. The only way to stop Trump, if you want to stop Trump, is to make sure that those facts can fit into the lives of people who don't agree with you. In other words, you have to place them in a context; you have to explain their relevance; and then you have to wait. Yes, you have to wait for the world to bear you out.

[00:29:23] **BRIAN LEHRER - HOST, THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW:** But if the argument, in the 1700s, that inspired Jefferson and others, was that, uh, censorship is bad because more information leads to good political decision-making... well, we certainly have more information in today's world than we've ever had before. And there is no shortage of bad political decision-making.

But are you suggesting that some of the very best values of our nation-- because the first amendment was based on this idea-- are based on utopian, wishful thinking and are bound to fail us?

[00:29:56] **BROOKE GLADSTONE - HOST, ON THE MEDIA:** Well, what are values? Values are our better angels. They don't necessarily reflect what's in the real world. But we have to understand that these are not mechanical principles. This is not physics. This is philosophy.

We want to believe that information will make us better people; a more informed electorate, as Jefferson would say. But many people, including John Adams-- and I... and I quote him towards the end of the book-- he says:

"Remember, democracy never lasts long; it soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. The passions are the same in all men, under all forms of simple government, and one unchecked... and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence, and cruelty. Individuals have conquered themselves; nations and large bodies of men, never."

In other words, we believe... it is a liberal principle... it is one of our foundational beliefs that democracy is the best system, and democracy works.

And what did we see in this election? A sense that it didn't work; that something went wrong. And I examine the role of the press; I examine the masterful use of alternate forms of information, and actually casting doubt on the very possibility of knowing reality.

Prescient Predictions 1984; Brave New World; and Network Part 2 - Future Tense - Air Date 7-7-19

[00:31:24] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** The 1976 film "Network" was wildly successful, commercially and critically. It earned its creator, Paddy Chayefsky, an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. His third, by the way. Network is often listed among the greatest movies ever made.

And David Itzkoff knows the film inside out. He's a cultural reporter for the New York Times and author of the book, "Mad as Hell: the Making of Network and the Fateful Vision of the Angriest Man in Movies."

[00:31:55] **DAVID ITZKOFF:** I think that its author, Paddy Chayefsky, was, essentially, a very pessimistic person, a very, sort of, dyspeptic kind of guy, certainly by the time he wrote that screenplay. I think he was somebody who, sort of, believed that human nature, if left unchecked, tended towards its worst inclinations. And particularly when that was applied to television and the media industry as he looked at it in the 1970s, he could imagine it going to a lot of kind of dire places.

And the movie, as successful as it was financially, as... as much as it was praised artistically, the people who worked in media, who worked in news at the time, thought it was, kind of, fanciful, and a little ridiculous. And I don't think

those same people would say that about the movie today, if they were around, and watching these things side by side.

[00:32:50] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** I mean, it was clearly an exaggeration, as you say, wasn't it? You know, it was a very dark satire. People, I think, forget that it was intended to be humorous. But did... did he mean it to be prophetic, or was he mostly critiquing his own times?

[00:33:06] **DAVID ITZKOFF:** No... Well, I think his opinion... his reaction, sort of, vacillated from day to day, certainly once the movie became successful. And he was getting a lot of praise as a, kind of, prophetic figure. I think that was a little bit hard for him to take. And I think he would, sort of, give you different answers depending upon when you asked him.

But I think... I think you're right in the sense that he did intend it... for it to be funny. And he was using media and television news as a, kind of, microcosm for all of society. He was just, sort of, honing in on one little slice of it, and a part of the world that he knew well, because he had worked in television as a TV screenwriter before he took off as a filmmaker.

So that was a world that he at least had some experience in, and he felt he could kind of use as, uh, you know, just a, sort of, sample size to show you, "Well, you know, here's what happens when people become completely disconnected from each other, and only interested in, sort of, pursuing profit and... and going after the lowest common denominator," et cetera.

But certainly, the things that he foresaw in media, and especially in news media, were... were pretty on point.

[00:34:14] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** It also speaks on a deeper level, doesn't it? About the infantilization of society in general, and almost the subjugation of empathy to entertainment. Is that why it continues to be such an important film today? Is that why it has relevance today?

[00:34:28] **DAVID ITZKOFF:** Well, I think it's, kind of, a fascinating film to watch now, because, of course, it was created in an era where, at least in America, there were only three major broadcast networks. There was no cable TV news to speak of at all. There was no internet whatsoever. And yet, uh, so many of the lessons that it has, and the messages that it has, are completely applicable to a, kind of, 2019 media environment; the way that emotion completely overruns a, kind of, fact based delivery system.

And also the way that, uh, you know, larger and larger corporations, kind of, subsume, you know, these journalistic entities and completely demolished their mission in... in the name of, you know, becoming more profitable, becoming more... more able to grab wider and wider audiences, with tawdrier and sleazier devices. All of that, I think, is, you know... it seems so far fetched, and that's what offended people at the time. But, I mean, we just accept it without even a second thought today.

[00:35:31] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** The most famous scene in the film is about anger. It's where the character of the demoagogic Howard Beale, the newscaster, urges the American people to rise up.

Let's take a listen to that:

[00:35:44] **PETER FINCH - HOWARD BEALE, NETWORK:** I don't want you to protest; I don't want you to ride; I don't want you to write to your Congressman-- because I wouldn't know what to tell you to write; I don't know what to do about the depression, and the inflation, and the Russians, and the crime in the street; all I know is that first you've got to get mad!

You got to say, "I'm a human being, God damn it! My life has value!

I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now, and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out, and yell, "I'm as mad as hell. I'm not going to take this anymore!"

[00:36:20] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** David Itzkoff, that call to anger, in and of itself, and not matched by any determined course of action; that feels very familiar, doesn't it? In this era of strident populous politics?

[00:36:31] **DAVID ITZKOFF:** Oh, absolutely. I think that... I mean, that's part of the message of the film, or one of the ideas that wanted to get at, certainly. The power, in particular, that television had then, and has now, as a platform to... if you... if you just offer it over to somebody to vent their spleen and, kind of, you know, rage wildly, that it's so dangerously potent. That communicating that message directly into, you know, millions of households, and... and living rooms and, just, the, you know, again, the... the, the power, and the danger that that can possess.

And, of course, uh, the audience of... the audience of Network is, sort of, in on this additional layer; that we-- as viewers of the film-- we know that Beale, Howard Beale, is slowly going insane. He's almost completely lost his mind at this point in the film.

And yet to the viewing audience in the film of Network, he seems to be completely sane. That he seems like he's somebody who's making a lot of sense in terms of the things he's complaining about, and the fears that he has, and is passing along to them.

It's... it's, kind of, a dark joke, as powerful and enduring as, uh, as that mad as hell speech is, that we know, as viewers, we're listening to, sort of, the unhinged rant of a lunatic.

[00:37:43] **ANTHONY FARNELL - HOST, FUTURE TENSE:** And there were quite a few contemporary world leaders in whom you can see some of that... that Beale attitude, and that Beale technique.

[00:37:51] **DAVID ITZKOFF:** I have absolutely no comment at this time. Perhaps. Yes. Yes. Perhaps there are others that have a, you know, in some way or another, adopted that methodology. No question.

And... and, you know, and Beale comes to it, sort of, accidentally, uh, in his own weird organic way. I think other people are certainly doing it much more pragmatically and deliberately. And, you know, it's not only leaders, it's, you know, media figures; it's broadcasters; people who, presumably, you know, they know the power and the danger of the field they work in. They are supposed to be-- we once believed-- operating within, sort of, ethical guidelines.

And, uh, those all, you know, went out the window long ago. Uh, certainly, you know, well, after Network, when Network seemed like, kind of, a high class, uh, joke.

That's part of what it was warning about. It was telling people, "There are no adults here." There's nobody at, sort of, the top of the architecture, calling balls and strikes and saying, "You're misbehaving, and you can't do this."

You know, once people start to, you know, loosen the guardrails, and take them away, that there's just no going back for society.

And that's applicable in a lot of different arenas.

Neil Postman on Cyberspace - The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour - Air Date 7-25-95

[00:39:04] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Cyberspace is a metaphorical idea which is supposed to be the space where your consciousness is located when you're using computer technology on the Internet, for example, and I'm not entirely sure it's such a useful term, but I think that's what most people mean by it.

[00:39:33] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** How does that strike you, I mean, that your consciousness is located somewhere other than in your body?

[00:39:39] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Well, the most interesting thing about the term for me is that it made me begin to think about where one's consciousness is when interacting with other kinds of media. For example, even when you're reading, where, where are you, what is the space in which your consciousness is located, and when you're watching television, where, where are you, who are you? Because people say with the Internet, for example, it's a little different in that you're always interacting or most of the time with another person. And when you're in cyberspace, I suppose you can be anyone you want. And I think as this program indicates, it's worth, it's worth talking about because this is a new idea and something very different from face-to-face co-presence with another human being.

[00:40:50] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** Do you think this is a good thing, or a bad thing, or you haven't decided?

[00:41:00] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Well, no, I've mostly-- [laughing] --I've mostly decided that new technology of this kind or any other kind is a kind of Faustian bargain. It always gives us something important but it also takes away something that's important. That's been true of the alphabet and the printing press and telegraphy right up through the computer. For instance, when I hear people talk about the information superhighway, it will become possible to shop at home and bank at home and get your texts at home and get entertainment at home and so on, I often wonder if this doesn't signify the end of any meaningful community life? I mean, when two human beings get together, they're co-present, there is built into it a certain responsibility we have for each other. And when people are co-present in family relationships and other relationships, that

responsibility is there. You can't just turn off a person. On the Internet, you can. And I wonder if this doesn't diminish that built-in, human sense of responsibility we have for each other. Then also one wonders about social skills; that after all, talking to someone on the Internet is a different proposition from being in the same room with someone--not in terms of responsibility but just in terms of revealing who you are and discovering who the other person is. As a matter of fact, I'm one of the few people not only that you're likely to interview but maybe ever meet who is opposed to the use of personal computers in school because school, it seems to me, has always largely been about how to learn as part of a group. School has never really been about individualized learning but about how to be socialized as a citizen and as a human being, so that we have important rules in school, always emphasizing the fact that one is part of a group. And I worry about the personal computer because it seems once again to emphasize individualized learning, individualized activity.

[00:43:48] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** What images come to your mind when you think about what our lives will be like in cyberspace?

[00:43:55] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Well, the worst images are of people who are overloaded with information which they don't know what to do with, have no sense of what is relevant and what is irrelevant, people who become information junkies.

[00:44:17] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** What do you mean? How do you mean that?

[00:44:18] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Well, the problem in the 19th century with information was that we lived in a culture of information scarcity and so humanity addressed that problem beginning with photography and telegraphy and the--in the 1840s. We tried to solve the problem of overcoming the limitations of space, time, and form. And for about a hundred years, we worked on this problem, and we solved it in a spectacular way. And now, by solving that problem, we created a new problem, that people have never experienced before: information glut, information meaninglessness, information incoherence. I mean, if there are children starving in Somalia or any other place, it's not because of insufficient information. And if crime is rampant in the streets in New York and Detroit and Chicago or wherever, it's not because of insufficient information. And if people are getting divorced and mistreating their children and their sexism and racism are blights on our social life, none of that has anything to do with inadequate information. Now, along comes

cyberspace and the information superhighway, and everyone seems to have the idea that, ah, here we can do it; if only we can have more access to more information faster and in more diverse forms, at long last we'll be able to solve these problems. And I don't think it has anything to do with it.

[00:46:08] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** Do you believe that this--that the fact that people are more connected globally will lead to a greater degree of homogenization of the global society?

[00:46:21] **NEIL POSTMAN:** Here's the puzzle about that, Charlayne. When everyone was--when McLuhan talked about the world becoming a global village, and when people ask, as you did, about how connections can be made, everyone seemed to think that the world would become, in some good sense, more homogenous. But we seem to be experiencing the opposite. I mean, all over the world, we see a kind of reversion to tribalism. People are going back to their tribal roots in order to find a sense of identity. I mean, we see it in Russia, in Yugoslavia, in Canada, in the United States, I mean, in our own country. Why is that every group now not only is more aware of its own grievances but seems to want its own education? You know, we want an Afro-centric curriculum and a Korean-centric curriculum, and a Greek-centered curriculum. What is it about all this globalization of communication that is making people return to more--to smaller units of identity? It's a puzzlement.

[00:47:42] **CHARLAYNE HUNTER GAULT - HOST, THE MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR:** Well, what do you think the people, society should be doing to try and anticipate these negatives and be able to do something about them?

[00:47:52] **NEIL POSTMAN:** I think they should--everyone should be sensitive to certain questions. For example, when a new--confronted with a new technology, whether it's a cellular phone or high definition television or cyberspace or Internet, the question--one question should be: What is the problem to which this technology is a solution? And the second question would be: Whose problem is it actually? And the third question would be: If there is a legitimate problem here that is solved by the technology, what other problems will be created by my using this technology? About six months ago, I bought a new Honda Accord, and the salesman told me that it had cruise control. And I asked him, "What is the problem to which cruise control is the solution?" By the way, there's an extra charge for cruise control. And he said no one had ever asked him that before but then he said, "Well, it's the problem of keeping your foot on the gas." And I said, "Well, I've been driving for 35 years. I've never

found that to be a problem." I mean, am I using this technology, or is it using me? Because in a technological culture, it is very easy to be swept up in the enthusiasm for technology, and of course, all the technophiles around, all the people who adore technology and are promoting it everywhere you turn.

Alexa, What's Amazon Doing Inside My Home_ - Land of the Giants - Air Date 7-30-19

[00:49:40] **PETER KAFKA - HOST, LAND OF THE GIANTS:** When I talked to Amy Webb, the futurist, she stressed that she thinks the stuff Amazon's creating has the potential to benefit humanity, but she did have this critique of the data gathering that Daniel Rausch is talking about here.

[00:49:54] **AMY WEBB:** Amazon's not great when it comes to transparency, so why certain data are being collected under what circumstances and for whom is almost never made understandable to the general public, nor to investors, or researchers, or anybody else.

[00:50:13] **PETER KAFKA - HOST, LAND OF THE GIANTS:** She's got a point. Next time you're at Amazon's website, go to Alexa's FAQ page. Want to know what specifically your voice data is being used for? They have some answers, but it's mostly generic answers, like this one, " Alexa uses your voice recordings and other information, including from third-party services, to answer your questions, fulfill your requests," and here's the vague ending, "improve your experience and our services."

So that's basically all Amazon tells us, but Daniel Rausch, he disagrees that Amazon's not transparent enough. He actually says transparency and control are things customers want and get from Alexa devices.

[00:51:01] **DANIEL RAUSCH:** They want it to be transparent. For example, you have access to everything that Alexa heard, in the sense that Alexa's, as a wake word, is invoked, and then those utterances are visible to you, whether that's in the application or online, and so there's complete transparency about that data. And then lastly, control. So you, as a customer, can go in, you can access that set of utterances, you can delete them one at a time or all at once. So we sort of build all of our experiences on that backbone of privacy and security for customers, and we're very proud of that.

[00:51:35] **PETER KAFKA - HOST, LAND OF THE GIANTS:** They're kind of talking about two different things. Rausch is talking about giving us the ability to see what's being recorded, but that doesn't answer Webb's question about all the other ways Amazon could be using the data. Webb's concerned mostly just because we don't know, so I asked Rausch about that. I asked him, are there teams at Amazon listening to skeptics and then working backward to make sure skeptics fears don't actually become.

[00:52:02] **DANIEL RAUSCH:** When we're at our best, we're, as a team, spending almost all of our time living in and thinking about the future. I know on my best days that's really what I get to do, but it's not sort of working backwards from skeptics, so to speak, it's working backwards from the important things we can do for customers.

[00:52:20] **PETER KAFKA - HOST, LAND OF THE GIANTS:** So sounds like it's almost always starting from a place of optimism about how technology could improve the future versus starting from a place of doubt.

[00:52:35] **DANIEL RAUSCH:** Deeply optimistic about it.

Final comments on Faustian Bargains

[00:52:37] **JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** We've just heard clips today, starting with *On The Media* in 2006, discussing the impact of TV overtaking print media. *C-SPAN Book TV* spoke with Neil Postman in 1992 about society's tendency to gravitate toward handing over control to technology. *Future Tense* explained the two worldviews of Orwell and Huxley. Brooke Gladstone of *On The Media* then also spoke with Brian Lehrer about Orwell and Huxley, but with a focus on coming to terms with the failures of ever greater levels of information in the wake of the Trump election. *Future Tense* did an analysis of the film *Network* and how it's been seen since its premiere. *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* spoke with Neil Postman, this time about the Faustian bargain of technological innovation and his eerily accurate predictions about the future. And finally, we heard a clip from the *Land of the Giants* podcast about Amazon that I think about often ever since first hearing it, as an Amazon executive proudly proclaims that he does the exact opposite of what critics like the eerily accurate Neil Postman advises; he thinks nothing of potential downsides of technology and marches blindly and confidently into the future.

And now we would usually be hearing from you, but I don't have any voicemails for today.

And I just have one quick thing to add, which is the definition of a Faustian bargain. And I'm sure that even if you didn't know the definition of a Faustian bargain by heart, you could figure it out from context clues. And you'd almost certainly know it by its other name, which is basically "a deal with the devil." But reading the full description from britannica.com, which is where I happened to look it up, showed me how perfect of a description it is to describe the trade-offs that we've been seeing with the internet recently.

So from britannica.com: A Faustian bargain is "a pact whereby a person trades something of supreme moral or spiritual importance, such as personal values or the soul, for some worldly or material benefit, such as knowledge, power, or riches." Okay. So far so good. Kind of normal. But check this out: "A Faustian bargain is made with a power that the bargainer recognizes as evil or amoral," which I would pause to point out is how I would describe the internet companies, not as evil, not as intentionally bad, but as amoral, driven by market forces, capitalism, the insistence to make ever more profit, et cetera. Continuing: "Faustian bargains are by their nature tragic or self-defeating for the person who makes them, because what is surrendered is ultimately far more valuable than what is obtained, whether or not the bargainer appreciates that fact."

So just let that simmer for a little while. And we will be getting more into the future of technology, not just the present of technology, in the next episode. But that's about all I have to add for today because I'm at the end of a very long week and I've got the deep tired -- I'm sure many of you know the feeling I'm talking about. Something crossed Amanda's screen recently about how humans aren't built to keep working full steam through the winter, in the dark and the cold. You know, we're supposed to be huddled together for warmth and surviving off what stores of food we managed to harvest in the fall, that sort of thing. And it's not that there's nothing to do in the winter. Obviously we're not just supposed to relaxing. But going full speed in the middle of January as if it was July feels like it's going against my nature in a deeply profound way and my body is rejecting it. So I don't have anything else major to add to what I think was a fantastic episode.

And I'll just say that if you want more from us, particularly something uplifting in these literally dark and cold times, I recommend our most recent members' show in which we had a lot of fun. It's not even the one that you nonmembers heard a sample of recently. There's a newer one than that. So if you've been thinking about trying out a membership, testing the waters a little bit, I think now would be a good time.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio, Ben, Ken, and Scott for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at BestoftheLeft.com/support, through our Patreon page, or from right inside the Apple Podcast app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content and no ads in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player.

So coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay!, and this has been the *Best of the Left* podcast coming to twice weekly, thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from BestoftheLeft.com.