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Who's afraid of YouTube Man?

Screen culture isn't dystopia – it's revelation.

By Nicholas Harris



Illustration by Seb Agresti

media. And, we are told, they're pushing it on your kids. Children will reportedly spend 25 years of their lives on their phones; the most hardened screentime-smackheads will clock up an absurd 41 years. We may be sleepwalking into a post-literate society, in which "short-form video" becomes the sole courier of information and feeling.

So frantic are commentators that they cannot decide which of their two favourite dystopias we are in. Are we the overalled slave army envisioned by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, screened and surveilled into a living nightmare? Or are we the joyous fools imagined by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, settling down to watch a "feelie" dosed up on delicious, numbing soma?

Behind this debate lurks the influential American critic Neil Postman, whose book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) forms the standard breviary for this techno-millennarianism. Postman fell into the Huxley school. He was also a comprehensive Luddite who avoided mobiles and refused email. Once, he waylaid a salesman for offering him cruise control on his new car.

Postman's lifestyle and arguments have been taken up across the techno-sceptic intelligentsia. The *Times* journalist James Marriott leads the charge, condemning the decline he sees everywhere (all, paradoxically, while maintaining a popular column recommending obscure works of social history). Recently, in these pages, he lamented the decline of English literature. I couldn't help but feel the standards being exacted were severe. Marriott relates a cultural upbringing reminiscent of the young John Stuart Mill, who began learning Ancient Greek at three years old. Unsurprisingly, the rest of us are found wanting.

This is trite, presentist *Kulturkritik*, and there are many trite arguments against it. People have never read as much or as well as clever people think they should. As John Carey writes in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), dons greeted the arrival of a reading public with a shriek, inventing the term "highbrow" to preserve their graces. In the eyes of this class, people are always reading the wrong thing or reading the wrong way.

Cycling through the skag of today's short-form videos, I am reminded of the kind of channel-hopping – *Hollyoaks* to MTV to *Big Brother's Big Mouth* – I once watched my sisters engage in on getting home from school. As long ago as 1993, David Foster Wallace analysed the impact of Americans watching six hours of TV a day – approximate to the "25 years" of damnation statisticians now predict. Television was the great stultifier then; now, prestige drama is venerated as the culmination of all the arts, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Meanwhile, the Eighties that so panicked Postman are seen as a rare period when long literary novels such as *Midnight's Children* and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* found a popular audience.

Modern humans have always been in need of pointless entertainment. Forty years ago, people simply doom-flicked through their tabloid. "Trash" and "slop" (which literary theorists call ephemera and simulacra) are features of modernity broadly defined, not just of 2025. The more worrisome cultural turn here is: rather than rely on celebrities to provide the necessary drunkenness, depression and adultery to fill the average red-top, social media companies have convinced their customers to cough up their own intimacies for free.

No one disputes that phones and videos make us feel good, at least in the moment. Having read the fearsome diagnostics – all the stuff about dopamine hits and reward pathways – I'd be wary of defending smartphone culture in the same way I'd be wary of defending tabloid newspapers. Or indeed heroin, which also feels good. But I will defend to the death what I regard as the greatest product of this brave new world: a tutor, a wonder, a friend.

By which I mean YouTube. Many a golden hangover has been passed, my phone as horizontal as my body, dozed out before a buffet of videos short and long, thoughtful and mindless. Load up the homepage and what awaits is a universe in thumbnailed panels, curated by the genius of "the algorithm". We're only a little over 20 years since

These days, for me, it's a lot of football videos, old *Harry and Paul* sketches and celebrity impressions. I really like watching chat shows from the Seventies and Eighties, with Kenneth Williams hissing and honking away. The situation has only advanced since the arrival of YouTube on the TV, an upgrade that has made me the King Edward of couch potatoes.

If this isn't the best use of my time, I'm reassured that when TS Eliot wasn't laying down epic poetry, he was down the music hall, and that Martin Amis broke up the composition of the novel *Money* with sessions of *Space Invaders*. Alan Hollinghurst played the same video game while dreaming up *The Swimming-Pool Library* (food for a future doctoral thesis?). Though probably none of us has a great novel in us, I feel I'm speaking on behalf of most young people, and especially men, in praising what may be the great solitary pleasure of our times.

One friend likes a YouTuber called Ed Pratt. He films himself unicycling around the world. Others report dedicated relationships with everything from SAS to DIY videos. A culinary friend is keen on a chef-videographer called "Willy Does Some Cooking", whose videos are packed with zany Gen-Z humour. Willy refers to chicken breasts as "chicken tits".

Cooking and nonsense is just the half of it. The hunger of the internet to be more serious will surprise those who still see YouTube as the home of make-up tutorials or narcissistic vloggers. Entire new genres have sprung up: the video essay, sort of short-form Adam Curtis, and frequently as intriguing. Are you telling me you wouldn't click on "Why Aren't There Locust Plagues Any More?", recently recommended by a friend? The pleasure of these videos can range from the shock of the strange to the utterly personal, the parasocial thrill of following a creator over projects and time.

In certain quarters, it's commonplace to mourn the demise of intellectual TV discussion shows, and hear mention of Channel 4's *After Dark* or the BBC's *Late Review*. But since YouTube broadcasts have no transmission times or dates, a vast number of these programmes can always be found. You can dose up for an eternity on Tom Paulin or Germaine Greer. The algorithm is an expert sommelier, and next up there'll be Terry Eagleton laying into Philip Larkin, Clive James chatting with PJ O'Rourke, Gore Vidal vs Norman Mailer. I am a YouTube-first reader, having watched the above authors before I read their works. The little poetry I have by heart also comes from hearing it recited on video (Jeremy Irons's "Prufrock" is pure bliss).

The pre-eminent lit-tuber is the late Christopher Hitchens, whose withering oratory has left a mark on a generation, for better or worse. My favourite exhibition is an astonishing 2007 episode of *Question Time*, which features both Hitchens and his brother, the *Mail on Sunday* columnist Peter Hitchens, as well as Boris Johnson, and in which Christopher addresses Baroness Shirley Williams as "*madam*".

Christopher Hitchens is at least partly responsible for transforming intellectual discourse into a kind of pugilism, these "debates" styled more like boxing matches replete with slugs, hooks and jibes. Hitchens spawned a brood of hideous epigones, from Douglas Murray to Ben Shapiro, who "DESTROY" and "OBLITERATE" their opponents as soon as speak to them, and who benefit from credulous interviewers.

But the form is finding its feet. And if podcasts are to be credited for mainstreaming long-form discussion, that is also a victory for YouTube, which hosts the best ones, from *The Rest Is History* to Novara Media's *Downstream*.

"There's a great convulsion of stupidity happening in the world, mostly to do with television," Martin Amis said in 1984, of all years. "People know a little about a lot and put very little effort into accumulating culture." (I first heard those words on YouTube in sixth-form.) Forty years later, it's tempting to agree.

profound reasons to be optimistic.

The modernists' great fear of mass culture was its smothering effect, that it would clam the delicate highbrows beneath the density of middlebrow. On YouTube, though, both have carved out commercial niches. Even as highbrow outlets (Radio 3, BBC Four) lose funding, audiences find their way towards similar material. The oldsters are joining me on the couch: in the past two years, over-55s doubled the amount of YouTube they watch on their TVs, now second only to the BBC in broadcasting landmass. And as it gains ground on its neighbour, the two landmasses resemble rival civilisations, one traditional and patrician, the other endlessly diverse, radically democratised and revolutionary in temper.

This is the domain of YouTube Man. He still reads – he tries to put his phone in another room – and he takes book recommendations from the people he watches. He's rarely seen the same TV show as his colleagues (though he suspects that nostalgia for “water cooler” moments is so much hokum anyway). Instead, his quirks and specificities are served by all-embracing software, a space to indulge his highest and lowest instincts. He is our most generic cultural consumer.

His needs are quite basic. In 2023, the journalist Helen Lewis speculated in her Substack newsletter *The Bluestocking* that podcasts were popular among men because they provide the mindless chat missing from their working lives, that they were “a replacement for the pub”. Might YouTube Man be filling the hole left behind by other declining associative institutions and forms: the hobby club, the reading group? Men share videos as they once did articles. Think of the stunt-feature genre of journalism. The writer Geoff Dyer was once sent by a men's magazine to fly in a decommissioned Russian fighter jet. Only a YouTuber could do this now, and it would make for an enthusiastically shared video. As YouTube supersedes television, it will become an increasingly collective viewing experience.

This is an ambiguous cultural development, but not a dystopian one. Social media is a radical experiment in leaving a culture to its devices. Rather like leaving a classroom of schoolboys unattended, we can see what it produces under its own steam, an unsupervised epoch of user-generated content. There will be the raised fist, the obscene remark and the vicious rumour: the last decade of history has prompted many liberals to develop a suspicion of “democratisation”. But still, it must be cause for celebration that, when the teacher reopens the door, there is something more interesting on the blackboard than just doodles and phalluses.

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