



## When the Chips are Down: Taking Time to Pay Attention to Real Issues

*By David Model*

Do not count on leaders of Western nations to suddenly and magically experience an epiphany and decide to abandon predatory capitalism and the use of force to achieve the political and economic objectives of rapacious corporations. Predatory capitalism, imperialism and militarism are so deeply embedded in the soul of our putatively democratically elected leaders that only mass protests, civil disobedience and refusal to cooperate with “evil” will pry these presidents and prime ministers from their prostituted subservience to the corporatocracy.

Global warming, deforestation, destruction of the oceans, hunger, poverty, human rights abuses and war crimes will, at best, be redressed by empty words and token gestures unless the public imbibes massive doses of caffeine. Unfortunately the public’s attention seems to be focused elsewhere.

Blackberries, cell phones, social networks on the internet, television and movies consume much of our free time and attention with their addictive allure and coveted escapism. What incentives and encouragement are extant to contemplate the many ubiquitous social justice and human rights crises that threaten our planet when they are compelled to compete with ephemeral, trivial, banal comments on Face Book or Twitter or an hour or two observing the mundane, egocentric lives of the Kardashians who bedazzle us with their wealth, beauty and fame?

To explain the apparent apathy and ignorance of the public, Neil Postman, Professor at New York University, wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985). In it he argued, à la Marshall McLuhan, that television as a medium would limit the audience’s ability to think rationally and would encourage them to base their opinions on images rather than on knowledge. He compares the impact of television entertainment to Huxley’s “soma” which serves as an anodyne to feelings of helplessness, powerlessness and fear. So rather than confronting the catastrophes for which we are all responsible through our lifestyle, we can escape into a world of illusion parading as reality.

In comparison, Harlan Ellison describes the state of mind induced by television in his book *The Glass Teat* (New York: Ace, 1970), as a soothing experience similar to babies suckling on their mother’s breast. According to Ellison: “It gets so damned depressing, coming up against the cultural harkiri we keep committing.” He describes television as bland and banal, just the prescription for an audience seeking to numb its fear that authentic reality might encroach into their consciousness inducing anxiety, fear, and guilt.

According to Noam Chomsky, the ruling elite desperately seek to maintain the public in a state of apathy and passivity thereby averting the risk that they might demand revolutionary changes to the political and

economic structures that would threaten their position of wealth and privilege. Michael Parenti, in *Make-Believe Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), reached the same conclusion when he warned that: "With the advent of television, a single information source can transmit images and viewpoints directly into millions of minds, making it difficult for people to separate the real from the unreal, pacifying and immobilizing them... diminishing their taste for intelligent public and private discourse."

Public and private discourse has been trivialized through the new technological advances in communications which limit people because "the medium is the message" to mostly mundane and superficial exchanges. Notwithstanding the benefits of cell phones, they to contribute to the problem by gobbling up free time for social and business discourse.

Neal Gabler, in *Life the Movie* (New York: Knopf, 1998), accurately predicted the prominence and impact of not only television but as well, reality TV. With excessive and sensational coverage of news events such as the killing of bin Laden, the royal wedding or the inanely overexposure of the daily lives of celebrities or pseudo-celebrities, reality has been transformed into a social construct of illusions with ordinary people as the actors. Talent or performance is no longer an obligatory expectation of celebrities whereas the only criterion has become exposure in the media. Consider the reality show *Jersey Shore* in which seven ordinary people who possess no special talent nor insights, have metamorphosized overnight into giant celebrities who appear on talk shows and who have been even offered their own shows.

But it could be argued that computers and the internet have opened up a world of knowledge and enlightenment and are not just mind-numbing technologies as modern-day luddites might suggest. Clifford Stoll, a professor at Berkley, disagrees in *High-tech Heretic* when he claims that: "Computing's instant gratification-built into the learning-is-fun mind-set-encourages intellectual passivity...Fed a diet of interactive insta-grat, students develop a distaste for persistence, trial and error, attentiveness, or patience." Intellectual passivity and lack of critical thinking are one of the impacts of an image-oriented, issue-abandoned, entertainment-seeking public whose minimum attention to important issues excludes awareness, critical thinking and insight.

An explanation of why people so desperately seek to escape reality is offered in *Idiot Proof* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004) by Francis Wheen, author and columnist, who states that: "The new irrationalism is an expression of despair by people who feel impotent to improve their lives and suspect that they are at the mercy of secretive, impersonal forces... Empirical analysis has always been opposed by those who fear that stripping away illusions can only end in miserable disillusion." Over the centuries, as Marx pointed out, religion has protected people from the nasty truths about themselves and their exploited, meaningless, chaotic and perplexing existence. Religion has been replaced by the succor of electronic gadgetry which deludes us by creating a world of illusion and images as in Plato's cave analogy where we can avoid the bright sunlight which reveals the inescapable truths of reality and instead hide in our cave observing its flickering images and shadows.

Author and columnist Chris Hedges, in *Empire of Illusion* (New York:

Nation Books, 2009) expounds further on this compulsion to seek illusions as a replacement for the tranquillizing and reassuring function of God by noting that: "The entertainment that envelops our culture, lays not in fooling us that these stories are real. Rather, it succeeds because we ask to be fooled." We need to avoid reality because it is too painful to contemplate. We cheered when bin Laden was assassinated and bought into all the lies propagated by the Obama administration when the real war criminals were in the White House and 10 Downing Street but we don't want to know that. It's the same phenomenon in the worldwide Jewish community most of whom rankle at the suggestion that Israel is committing any war crimes in Gaza. Most Americans do not want to acknowledge that their government is complicit in the same war crimes by supporting Israel.

I am fortunate as a professor of International Relations and Political Science to be granted a gift of about 400 students a year who can potentially be inspired to care and pay attention. Unremarkably, once they are confronted with the social injustices and violations of human rights in the world and in their own countries, they demand to know what they can do to make a difference.

The conclusion drawn from my own personal experience is that people retain the capacity to care and feel compelled to act on social injustice and human rights crises but only when the electronic gadgetry is turned off and they have the time to slow down and pay attention and avoid the temptation to be distracted by the false gods of golden technological advances.

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