THE SOURCE CODE WARS

RECLAIMING LIFE IN A DIGITAL AGE

EDITED BY BRETT McCRACKEN + IVAN MESA

"Rarely does a collection of chapters from diverse contributors come together to form such a cohesive vision, offering penetrating insights into our current cultural moment. *Scrolling Ourselves to Death* goes beyond merely revisiting Neil Postman's groundbreaking work; it uses Postman's insights as a springboard for deeper reflection and application, all while keeping an eye on the eternal truths of Scripture that remain unchanged in our rapidly advancing technological age."

Trevin Wax, Vice President for Research and Resource Development, North American Mission Board; Visiting Professor, Cedarville University; author, *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*, *The Multi-Directional Leader*; and *This Is Our Time*

"If you're feeling anxious, irritable, or tired today, one reason is that you've probably spent about five hours on your smartphone—texting, checking the weather, or scrolling social media. In *Scrolling Ourselves to Death*, a slate of authors explains how screens are changing us—and how Christians are uniquely positioned to choose a fuller, better life. By reflecting and building on Neil Postman's insights about television, this book will help you reevaluate and reimagine the choices you're making for yourself, your family, and your community."

Sarah Zylstra, Senior Writer, The Gospel Coalition; editor, *Social Sanity in an Insta World*

"There are books that are enjoyable and books that are important; *Scrolling Ourselves to Death* is both. Although some of the content is sobering—disturbing at times—the contributors never leave the reader hopeless. This is a vitally important book that will help the church clearly communicate the gospel to a world bombarded by distraction."

John Perritt, Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries; author, *Social Media Pressure: Finding Peace Alongside Jesus*

Scrolling Ourselves to Death

Other Gospel Coalition Books

Behold and Believe: A Bible Study on the "I Am" Statements of Jesus, by Courtney Doctor and Joanna Kimbrell

Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion, by Rebecca McLaughlin

Fruitful: Cultivating a Spiritual Harvest That Won't Leave You Empty, edited by Megan Hill and Melissa B. Kruger

Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage, by Gavin Ortlund

Letters Along the Way: From a Senior Saint to a Junior Saint, by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge

Loving Your Adult Children: The Heartache of Parenting and the Hope of the Gospel, by Gaye B. Clark

Make the Most of Your Productivity: A Guide to Honoring God with Your Time, by Ana Ávila

Mission Affirmed: Recovering the Missionary Motivation of Paul, by Elliot Clark

Questioning Faith: Indirect Journeys of Belief through Terrains of Doubt, by Randy Newman

Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential, by Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman

Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope, by Matthew McCullough

You're Not Crazy: Gospel Sanity for Weary Churches, by Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry

To explore all titles from the Gospel Coalition, including those in the New City Catechism, TGC Kids, and TGC Hard Questions lines, visit TGC.org/books.

Scrolling Ourselves to Death

Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age

Edited by
Brett McCracken
and Ivan Mesa

CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Scrolling Ourselves to Death: Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

Cover design: David Fassett

Cover image: Getty Images and iStock

First printing 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9944-6
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335—9946-0
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9945-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCracken, Brett, 1982– editor. | Mesa, Ivan, editor.
Title: Scrolling ourselves to death : reclaiming life in a digital age / edited by Brett McCracken and Ivan Mesa, Jr.
Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2025. | Series: The gospel coalition | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024032493 (print) | LCCN 2024032494 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433599446 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433599453 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433599460 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Technological innovations—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Digital media—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Social media—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Christian life.
Classification: LCC BR115.T42 S46 2025 (print) | LCC BR115.T42 (ebook) |
DDC 248.4—dc23/eng/20240911
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024032493
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024032494

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction

Back to the Future

How a 1985 Book Predicted Our Present

Brett McCracken

HEADS DOWN. Phones out. Fingers scrolling. This is the humanoid posture of our age.

We see it everywhere. Sit in a coffee shop and look around you. All eyes on devices. Wait in line at the post office or grocery store. All eyes on devices. Sit at a red light and look at the drivers in the cars around you. Same story. More disturbing still, look at the drivers on the highway going full speed. Even some of *them* have their eyes darting between the windshields and their smartphones.

We see it in ourselves too. Sit down to read a physical book with your phone nearby. Observe how long you can go without scrolling, texting, or checking some notification. When you're standing in line at a coffee shop and have forty-five seconds to spare, notice how hard

it is to resist the urge to pull out your phone to do something—*anything*—to fill that blank space. More disturbing still, monitor how much time elapses between the moment you wake in the morning until the moment you unlock your phone and start scrolling.

For many of us, it's only a matter of seconds.

From the rising of the sun to its going down, we scroll our way through the day. We scroll our way through life. And we are scrolling ourselves to death.

The death march of our scrolling society is not just a metaphor. In many ways, the smartphone is literally killing us (and not just in distracted-driving automobile accidents). Researchers have made compelling correlations between smartphone (especially social media) usage and rising mental unhealth (depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, loneliness), especially among teens and young adults.[1] Consider the staggering rise in suicide rates among US youth and young adults since the dawn of the smartphone age. Between 2001 and 2007, the suicide rate for kids ages ten to twenty-four was fairly stable, but since 2007 (the year the iPhone debuted), it has skyrocketed, rising 62 percent between 2007 and 2021.[2]

Technology has also helped accelerate a "loneliness epidemic" with demonstrable, wide-ranging negative effects on overall health.[3]

1 See especially Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017) and *Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future* (New York: Atria Books, 2023); and Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024).

2 Sally C. Curtin and Matthew F. Garnett, "Suicide and Homicide Death Rates among Youth and Young Adults Aged 10–24: United States, 2001–2021," NCHS Data Brief, no. 471, June 2023, https://www.cdc.gov.

3 Tatum Hunter, "'Technology's Role in the 'Loneliness Epidemic,'" *Washington Post*, April 11, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/.

The ominous term "deaths of despair" has become part of contemporary vernacular. And after steadily climbing for most of the last century, average life expectancies in the United States have, since 2021, started to decline.

Certainly more than technology is at play in these trends. But not less. When we consider the variables that have *most* changed in society in the last two decades, any answer we come up with will center around digital technology. We didn't know what "social media" was twenty-five years ago. The term *smartphone* was first coined in 1997. The World Wide Web is barely three decades old. Each of these things has utterly reshaped the world in the last quarter century. And things continue to move fast—so fast that we rarely pause long enough to ask questions or ponder unintended side effects. As Antón Barba-Kay put it in *A Web of Our Own Making*, digital technology has so vastly transformed human life over just a few decades that "there is now arguably a greater chasm between someone age twelve and someone age fifty (or forty, or thirty) than there ever was between people separated by a millennium of pharaonic rule in ancient Egypt."[4]

Our critical faculties struggle to keep pace with the scope and speed of the digital revolution. As a result, we're often blind to the ways we're being transformed. If we could jump forward in time a few decades, we could see more clearly. But since we can't do that, our best path to wisdom is often in the other direction: looking back in time, learning from bygone eras and voices. What we can't see now can be illuminated, at least in part, by the insights of generations past.

One book I return to again and again is Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The book was prophetic when it released in 1985, and it's even more prophetic now, four decades later.

4 Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 15.

Which Dystopia?

Just as today we look back to Postman's book to help make sense of our cultural moment, so too did Postman look to the past from his vantage point in 1985, at the peak of what he called the "Age of Show Business." The old books Postman looked to for insight were a pair of dystopian novels: George Orwell's *1984* (published in 1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Working on his book in 1984, Postman pondered: Had Orwell's vision of that year come to fruition? Or was Huxley's dark vision of the future more accurate?

Postman concluded that Huxley's dystopia, not Orwell's, better predicted the shape Western society took in the latter half of the twentieth century. As he explained,

> Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure.[5]

5 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 20th anniversary ed. (1985; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2005), xxi–xxii.

If Postman was astute in 1985 to observe the Huxleyan shape of our "trivial culture"—where opted-in distractions and diversions kept us numb and dumb—how much more accurate does his prophetic vision describe life in 2025?

When Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves*, he had television mostly in view as the chief purveyor of trivial information that swept us away in a "sea of irrelevance." Forty years later, we still have TV—albeit hundreds more channels and a growing number of streaming TV platforms. But we also have YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and other always-on pipelines of content, algorithmically designed to grab our attention and keep us watching and scrolling, eyes glued to screens.

"Amusing ourselves to death" is still a highly accurate descriptor of what mass media does to us. But now the dominant form it takes is scrolling. And while Postman, who died in 2003, never lived to see the way smartphones, streaming, and social media would transform the world, his wisdom and warnings ring out with potent relevance.

Just as Huxley helped Postman make sense of his world in 1985, Postman can help us make sense of ours.

Who Was Neil Postman?

I first came across Postman when I was an undergraduate communications major at Wheaton College. One of my professors had studied with Postman at New York University. In helping us become better thinkers about the *forms* of media rather than just their *content*, he introduced my class to the concept of *media ecology*, which Postman had first coined, building on the work of Marshall McLuhan. I quickly devoured all the Postman books I could get my hands on, from *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) to

Technopoly (1992) to *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (1999), and, of course, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

This was in the early 2000s at the dawn of the internet age. I sensed the wisdom of Postman and McLuhan would be vital in my life as a Christian navigating a world of rapidly changing technologies. My interest in media ecology—particularly its implications for theology and the Christian life—led me to enroll in a media studies master's program at UCLA. Postman is in the backdrop of much of my writing about culture and the church.[6] I'm convinced he's a thinker whose wisdom is vital for the contemporary church. This present volume is an attempt to introduce Postman to a broader audience of Christians or to help those already familiar with him to apply his insights in helpful ways in their lives and ministry contexts.

Born into a Yiddish-speaking family in Brooklyn the year before Huxley published *Brave New World*, Postman lived in New York City for most of his life and became one of America's most prominent public intellectuals in the latter half of the twentieth century. He founded NYU's Steinhardt School of Education's program in media ecology in 1971 and was chair of the Department of Culture and Communication until 2002. Most of his work explored how media and technology influenced education, childhood development, politics, and public discourse. But he was also interested in how the "medium" influenced the "message" of religion and ostensibly sacred texts.

Postman wasn't a Christian. He was Jewish. But his faith informed his perspectives. *Amusing Ourselves* is full of references

6 See especially *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010) and *The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

to God and the history of religious discourse in America going back to the Great Awakenings of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield's day. There's a clear sense that, of all the things that had become "trivialized" in the age of show business, Postman was most uneasy with how God and theology were being refashioned in the image of a TV variety show (televangelism was at its peak influence when Postman was writing).

The context in which Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves* is important. The mid-1980s was the era of Ronald Reagan's presidency—a time when the highest office in the land was occupied by a former Hollywood actor (a point we hardly shrug at today but that was novel and ghastly to intellectuals like Postman at the time). The 1980s was also a period of TV's rapid expansion from three main networks to—with the onset of cable—dozens of channels, including the first-ever twenty-four-hour news network (CNN, in 1980).

In Postman's view, TV accelerated a seismic shift in the dynamics of information. For much of human history, he observed, we suffered from *information scarcity*. But now we have the opposite problem: *information satiation*. The information glut has many side effects, which Postman details in *Amusing Ourselves*. These include information trivialization in a "Now . . . this" flow of discombobulating coverage ("How serious can a flood in Mexico be, or an earthquake in Japan, if it is preceded by a Calvin Klein jeans commercial, and followed by a yogurt commercial?"[7]); a tendency toward impatience, forgetfulness, and poor logic in how we process information; and a massive shift in the formula for political success.

On politics Postman was especially prophetic. He observed a change in how voters picked leaders—no longer chiefly on the

7 "Life and Career of Neil Postman," *C-SPAN*, January 14, 1988, video, https://www.c-span.org/.

grounds of agreeing with (let alone understanding) the candidate's policies, but instead on the personality of the candidate ("Do I *like* this person?"). Image, branding, and "relatability" replaced issues. "We may have reached the point," Postman argued, "where cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control."[8] Keep in mind, Postman was observing this eight years before Bill Clinton played the saxophone on *Arsenio Hall* and told voters, in a town hall debate, "I feel your pain." He was seeing this trajectory three decades before the reality TV star Donald Trump became president.

On these and many other points, *Amusing Ourselves* was utterly prescient.

Applying Postman, Forty Years Later

Postman's critique isn't perfect. At times, he pushed too hard the idea that printed words are the only valid means of communicating important truths and fostering meaningful discourse. He occasionally comes across snobbish when, for example, he scoffed at the idea that an actor could become an effective US president. And while his discussions of American history are fascinating, the book at times feels too nostalgic for bygone eras in US history. Indeed, I wish Postman didn't single out American culture as much as he did. However much the United States tends to exemplify the media dynamics he critiqued, the problems he identified are everywhere, even more now than in the 1980s. In his *New York Times* review in 1985, Anatole Paul Broyard put it well: "Much of 'Amusing Ourselves to Death' is true, but it's not the whole truth and nothing but the truth."[9]

8 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 4.

9 Anatole Broyard, "Going Down the Tube," *New York Times*, November 24, 1985, 9, https://www.nytimes.com.

Still, despite its flaws and its admittedly dated focus on analog television, the principles Postman offered are highly applicable today. Some of his insights have become even *more* incisive today than they were forty years ago.

One of Postman's key points about television as a medium, for example, is even more astute and important when applied to today's internet-shaped world. Postman argued that above all else, television's function is to gather an audience that can be sold to advertisers. TV exists as an efficient instrument for the advancement of corporate profits by delivering huge audiences of captive eyeballs. Here's how Postman put it in a C-SPAN interview in 1988: "In the past, audiences were gathered for specific reasons—to hear speeches or even to see specific events—but television doesn't do that. Its job is to gather an audience, and it doesn't really much care what it uses as the means to gather an audience."[10]

Postman argued that American television in particular discovered quickly that the best way to gather an audience was not to *responsibly inform* or *truthfully report* but to *constantly amuse*. Once we recognize this fact—that television is fundamentally oriented around commandeering your attention so it can be monetized—we can begin to resist its pull.[11]

The same is true today, even as the stakes are higher. The internet, like television, traffics in the currency of attention.[12] Every app, every website, every social media influencer whose bottom line depends on keeping eyeballs engaged is in the business of audience building. And the business of audience building—whether

10 "Life and Career."

11 See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

12 See Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

you're the *New York Times* or the NFL, Barack Obama or Blippi—is ultimately an *amusement* business.

What will captivate a scrolling eye long enough to pause the fidgety finger and get it to click? What content will maximally trigger adrenaline or dopamine rushes and cultivate addictive behavior, keeping audiences tuned in? Make no mistake: these questions drive almost every corporation, advertiser, editor, performer, creator, thinker, and influencer vying for attention in a vastly crowded media environment. And it has serious implications for them. And for you.

Goal of This Book

If the dynamics of the television age posed provocative questions for Christians in the 1980s, the dynamics of the internet age have only amplified the questions—and introduced many new ones—in the 2020s. For our own spiritual health, and to maintain a prophetic power and witness in a world being changed faster than it can even recognize, Christians in this cultural moment should slow down and think wisely about the ever-changing technologies swirling around us.

Sadly, many Christians default toward a naïve embrace of technology as a neutral and merely pragmatic tool to be harnessed for mission. But as Postman—following McLuhan—rightly argued, no technology is neutral. New technologies shape our thinking: what we think *about*, the symbols and metaphors we think *with*, and the forums in which thoughts develop.[13]

Technology's power to shape thinking should matter to every sensible person, but it should especially matter for Christians.

13 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 20.

After all, our mission revolves around transactions of thought: the gospel message being heard, understood, internalized, and applied. Because getting people to think well about God and the Bible (theology) is central to Christian mission, we must be aware of how thinking is changing as a result of different technologies and how our habits of worship, preaching, evangelism, and apologetics might need to adjust to these shifting dynamics.

This book is intended to get you thinking about technology, in part by showing you how current technology is changing the way we think. Using Postman's *Amusing Ourselves* as a jumping-off point, the contributors will explore various questions, challenges, and opportunities the church must grapple with in this highly formative technological moment.

The chapters in part 1 ("Postman's Insights, Then and Now") introduce some of Postman's core arguments in *Amusing Ourselves*, especially in light of what has changed since he wrote the book. The chapters in part 2 ("Practical Challenges Facing Christian Communicators") apply Postman's concepts particularly to the challenges facing gospel communicators (preachers, teachers, apologists, evangelists) in our contemporary context. Finally, the chapters in part 3 ("How the Church Can Be Life in a 'Scrolling to Death' World") turn from negative challenges to positive opportunities, suggesting ways the church can be a radical, life-giving alternative to the unhealthy habits of the digital world. If you feel a bit depressed reading some of the sober assessments in the first two sections of the book, hang in there and keep reading. The concluding chapters offer some positive visions—and practical recommendations—that give me hope.

This book makes the case that as Christians seek to wisely navigate our present—and future—media environment, we would

do well to hear and heed Postman's clarion call. We look to Postman not as an all-encompassing explainer of everything or an all-knowing guide for the future but as a provocative voice that prompts necessary thinking and constructive conversations—not just for the sake of our own scrolling souls but also for the sake of our lost neighbors. The church mustn't stand by as scores of people scroll their way into oblivion, distracting themselves to death and clicking their way to corruption. We must step in and speak truth that gives life, redirecting glazed-over eyes and lifting hunched-down faces to behold the one who is infinitely more satisfying than whatever fleeting amusements flash across our screens.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you read Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*? If not, you should. It's a good companion to this volume. If you've read it, what stands out as the most prophetic insight from Postman as it relates to the technological world forty years after he published the book?

2. McCracken uses the phrase "currency of attention" and argues much of the internet is in the business of audience building, which "is ultimately an *amusement* business." What does it mean that your attention is so profitable for corporations and content creators online? How does this inform our understanding of scrolling habits as a matter of our spiritual formation?

3. Can you think of an example of a technology Christians uncritically adopted for a pragmatic purpose that eventually led to unforeseen negative consequences? Or a technology in our broader society that was introduced to solve a particular problem but ended up creating new problems?

4. What do you see as the most acute pain points for Christians and churches as they interact with new technologies? On what specific topics do we need to pursue the sort of "necessary thinking and constructive conversations" McCracken says this book is designed to spark?

PART 1

POSTMAN'S INSIGHTS, THEN AND NOW

1

From Amusement to Addiction

Introducing Dopamine Media

Patrick Miller

IN 2011, Julijonas Urbonas unveiled a miniature model of his "Euthanasia Coaster." If built, the full-size roller coaster would be four-and-a-half miles long, beginning with a massive drop, followed by seven consecutive tightening loops accelerating to a lethal 10 Gs of force.

"It's a euthanasia machine in the form of a roller coaster," Urbonas explained, "engineered to humanely, with euphoria and pleasure, kill a human being."[1] The acceleration causes the rider to suddenly suffocate, inducing a brief, painless, euphoric state generated when the brain focuses only on vital activities.

1 Nate Swanner, "The 'Euthanasia Coaster' Was Designed to Kill Riders with Elegant Violence," The Manual, October 12, 2023, https://www.themanual.com/.

Euthanasia is unethical, so we can be thankful no such amusement exists. Nonetheless, you can find countless articles, YouTube videos, Reddit threads, and social media posts in which ordinary people share how much they like the idea. *Why not amuse yourself to death?* After all, it's strangely poetic for humans addicted to amusement to die by it. From entertainment you were made, and to entertainment you shall return.

No one likes to think of himself as an entertainment addict, wasting away his life on impulsively foolish, self-indulgent, self-destructive endeavors. But if an objective observer from a pre-digital era followed you around for a day and watched you compulsively check your phone, refresh your email, ogle at social media, binge videos, and tune out your children with AirPods, what conclusions would he draw?

Would he see an addict? Someone on a decades-long Euthanasia Coaster, slowly amusing himself to death in the way Postman predicted?

Postman's insights four decades ago can help us in our own time as we consider technology's trade-offs and how we're being shaped by our internet-era media environment, for good and ill. The internet, social media, mobile computing, and artificial intelligence have brought benefits we don't want to give away, but they've also come with costs. Is the trade-off worth it?

Postman understood that all "new technology for thinking involves a trade-off": "It giveth and taketh away, although not quite in equal measure. Media change does not necessarily result in equilibrium. It sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it is the other way around. We must be careful in praising or condemning because the future may hold surprises for us."[2]

2 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 20th anniversary ed. (1985; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 29.

So let's embrace carefulness, and ask, What are the trade-offs of internet-era digital technologies?

How Media Changes How We Think

Postman didn't live to see our current iteration of digital technology, but he modeled *how* to think through trade-offs—particularly how media changes the way we *think*.

In *Technopoly*, Postman reflected on a myth from Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which an Egyptian king named Thamus converses with the divine progenitor of reading and writing, Theuth. The god explains all the benefits which will accrue to humans who adopt his new media format. But King Thamus demurs. The trade-off isn't worth it: "Those who acquire [writing] will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful. . . . They will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources."[3]

Postman agreed with King Thamus that there were mental trade-offs with the widespread adoption of reading and writing. Memory was one. However, the written word also generated new mental worlds: theology, the natural sciences, ecology, economics, mathematics, philosophy, sociology, medicine, and much more besides.

The trade-off was real but worth it.

That's not the case with later technologies, Postman believed. He thought TV changed how we think for the worse. To be clear, Postman said he was *not* claiming "that changes in media bring about changes in the structures of people's minds."[4] But much of his work gives that impression. He argued that people in the

3 Plato quoted in Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 10–11.

4 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 27.

televisual era learned and thought about truth differently than those in the prior (typographical) era.[5] Their televisual minds lacked the attention necessary to engage in the long-form discourse common in the typographic era.[6] Worse, the televisual mind lacked typographical fluency in abstract reasoning, preferring the concrete and emotive. Postman thought TV cultivated a highly subjective, highly expressive, highly therapeutic, and highly individualized way of perceiving the world and self, and of evaluating truth.

Those weren't merely changes to the structure of discourse. They were changes in the mind.

The same is true today. Yes, digital media changes the structure of discourse. But that's not all it changes. If Postman were alive, I suspect he might be nostalgic for the TV era. Because what followed TV is quite literally rewiring our brains.[7]

We're amusing ourselves into addiction. Entertainment culture metastasized into something not even Postman could have predicted: dopamine media. In some ways, the dystopia that inspired his work, Huxley's *Brave New World*, did see it coming. In that universe, a drug called Soma is used to anesthetize the people and keep them happy. Our addictive (more on this later) drug of choice isn't ingested or injected. It's consumed ocularly.

The trade-off we all make in the digital era is not merely between substantive and trivial discourse. It's between sobriety and

5 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 61, 71.

6 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 45.

7 The effects of this rewiring are most pronounced among children going through puberty. The long-term addictive effects described later in this chapter will only escalate with the aging of Gen Z, the first generation to receive *digital dopamine* (more on that phrase later). See Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024), 136.

addiction. While TV addicts have existed since television's inception, the technology wasn't addictive enough or constantly accessible enough to become dependence-forming. It's easy to think smartphones are just an extension of TV technology, but even though the phone in your pocket looks like a tiny TV, it's actually something far more nefarious.

Your phone is a digital syringe.

It's a gateway to lifelong, brain-altering, relationship-destroying addiction.

Digital Dopamine Nation

In *Dopamine Nation*, Stanford professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences Anna Lembke argues pervasive, cheap, and easy-to-access products and experiences that release dopamine in the brain are creating a mental health crisis unlike any other in human history. This is for the simple reason that most people in history lived with scarcity—limited access to the foods, substances, and experiences that release dopamine in the brain—but now we live in a world of abundance. Our brains were not designed to live in such a world.

The consequence of dopamine abundance is addiction. To understand how this works, Lembke says it's helpful to imagine your brain like a seesaw. On one side is pleasure; on the other side is pain.[8] Your brain wants to retain equilibrium, to keep the seesaw flat.

The longer you spend with your mental seesaw tipped to pleasure, the harder the pain comedown. While your reflexive self-regulation mechanisms press the pain side down, you may

8 Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (New York: Dutton, 2021), 51–53.

experience heightened levels of stress, depression, and irritability, and a whole array of psychological symptoms that make your brain want *more* dopamine to relieve your psychological distress.

Throughout most of history, it was hard to find substances and experiences that could press the pleasure side, so equilibrium was more commonly attained. But when you live in a society awash with dopamine factories—social media, pornography, gaming, high-calorie foods, alcohol, online gambling—you face a constant, pathological temptation to press the seesaw on the pleasure side.

The problem is that the more you repeat a dopamine-releasing behavior, the greater your tolerance becomes. This applies to social media—a proven dopamine-releasing substance—which was designed to be addictive.[9] Thus, if it took only two TikToks to spike your dopamine the first time, it will take four the tenth time, and dozens the hundredth. Whatever your drug of choice, you need more and more of it to get the original high *and* more and more of it to reduce the psychological pain you experience when you come down from your high.

It's a vicious cycle. Anyone who experiences ghost vibrations in his pocket—beckoning him to clutch his phone—knows this cycle. Anyone who's opened YouTube or Instagram to watch a video for five minutes only to inexplicably lose an hour knows this cycle. Anyone who cannot resist the impulse to watch digital pornography or gamble online knows this cycle. If the faintest shadow of boredom makes you compulsively check your phone, then you know this cycle. If you are easily distracted during a conversation with your spouse by the strange and desperate urge to check your

9 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 191.

phone, then you know this cycle. If a brief moment of anxiety makes you swipe madly through your phone looking for *any* unread notification, then you know this cycle.

Your brain is seeking dopamine. It's whispering, "Get out the digital syringe. Take another hit. Then the boredom, stress, irritability, and blues will go away."

In the brain, what goes up must come down. And the comedowns from consistent use of dopamine media are causing a social and mental health catastrophe on a scale never before seen.[10] NYU psychology professor Jonathan Haidt analyzed countless studies to determine that social media and smartphones are causing this catastrophe, especially among our children. Teenage boys and girls are experiencing higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.[11] According to a recent US surgeon general's advisory report, it's all correlated to smartphone use.[12] The advisory report urges parents not to give their children access to social media. Despite laws prohibiting social media usage under the age of thirteen without parental permission, 38 percent of children between the ages of eight to twelve are using regularly—many for hours a day.[13] Ninety-five percent of teens between thirteen and seventeen are using digital dope, and most parents can't bring themselves to tell them to stop, even though social media's dangerous and addictive effects are now widely known.

10 Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 14.

11 Jonathan Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," *Atlantic*, April 11, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com.

12 *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*, US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf.

13 V. Rideout, A. Peebles, S. Mann, and M. B. Robb, "Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens," (San Francisco, CA: Common Sense), 2022,https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf.

The transition from entertainment culture to dopamine media culture created more addiction in more households. To resist this addiction, we must first understand what it is and how it addicts users. Only then can we explore pathways forward for Christians and churches.

Dopamine Media Is a Digital Las Vegas

Postman suggested every era in American history is represented by a city.[14] Boston was the apotheosis of revolutionary fervor. Chicago was the incarnation of industrial dynamism. New York was the personification of melting-pot America. And finally, Las Vegas became the avatar of overentertained America.

Postman was right about Las Vegas. The city is world-renowned for its extravagant, ubiquitous entertainment. But Vegas is more renowned for something else: gambling. And thus, it's also the ideal embodiment of the current phase of American history: dopamine media.

While most Americans tend to think of substances as addictive—especially those that directly deliver dopamine—new research shows that behaviors can be profoundly addictive as well because they release dopamine in the brain. In 2013, pathological gambling was reclassified as an addictive disorder by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. And the way gambling works on the brain is exactly how dopamine media works. Lembke explains: "Studies indicate that dopamine release as a result of gambling links to the *unpredictability of the reward delivery*, as much as to the final (often monetary) reward itself. The motivation to gamble is based largely on the inability to predict the reward occurrence, rather than on financial gain."[15]

14 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 3.

15 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 61. Emphasis added.

A 2010 study found those addicted to gambling experience higher levels of dopamine release not when they *won* money but when they stood an equal chance of winning or losing money.[16] The best dopamine high came from uncertainty, not victory. In other words, when it comes to dopamine, anticipation of a reward can create more pleasure than the reward itself.[17] A slot machine is addictive because it keeps you in an anticipation loop: the big win is always just around the corner, so you pull the lever one more time, releasing anticipation dopamine in your brain.

This insight is key because it's central to how dopamine media works. Behavioral psychologists in virtually every big tech corporation design their platforms and apps (social media, news media, video media) using intermittent variable rewards, what have been called digital slot machines. Natasha Schull, author of *Addiction by Design*—a book researching actual slot machines—explains that "Facebook, Twitter, and other companies use methods similar to the gambling industry to keep users on their sites."[18]

Every time you post on social media, you pull a digital lever and receive an intermittent variable reward. Sometimes you win two likes, sometimes you win two hundred. If you're scrolling through reels, some videos are duds but some make you squeal with laughter. The great appeal of short-form video content—pioneered by TikTok and replicated by Meta and YouTube—is that the brevity allows the user to pull the lever constantly. The brain is constantly

16 Jakob Linnet, Arne Møller, Ericka Peterson, Albert Gjedde, and Doris Doudet, "Dopamine Release in Ventral Striatum During Iowa Gambling Task Performance Is Associated with Increased Excitement Levels in Pathological Gambling," *Addiction* 106, no. 2 (February 2011), 383–90, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2010.03126.x.

17 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 62.

18 Mattha Busby, "Social Media Copies Gambling Methods 'to Create Psychological Cravings,'" *Guardian*, May 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/us.

releasing dopamine as it anticipates a reward. When you lose and get a lame video, you experience brief frustration or boredom, which only sends you back for more.

Swipe. Swipe. Swipe. Swipe.

Every time we do it, we're rewiring our brains the same way gambling addicts do.

What sets dopamine media apart from entertainment media isn't just its slot machine design, however; it's dopamine media's constant accessibility and algorithmic curation.

In Postman's day, humans had limited access to TV. Physically, it was stationary. To watch TV you had to sit in a room with a large device that needed to be plugged in. Additionally, you could watch only what was being broadcast on certain channels at certain times, on a schedule you didn't design. While cable networks tried to curate more niche-based spaces—think HGTV, the Food Network, or Comedy Central—television was never actually personalized.

Dopamine media is entirely different. It is physically unencumbered, traveling on your person and accessible anywhere. It's also temporally unconstrained. There aren't schedules. Thus, you can access *whatever* media you want, *whenever* you want, *wherever* you want.

But here is the real secret sauce: artificial intelligence. Everything you see on virtually every app and platform—from ads to videos to posts to search results—is generated by recommender algorithms: advanced AIs that use your data to create a digital model of you so it can feed you bespoke content to keep and monetize your attention.[19] Your social media feed is bespoke. It is designed to keep you specifically addicted, by AIs whose computational knowledge of you is shockingly vast and actionable. Their main job is to keep

19 Lev Grossman, "How Computers Know What We Want—Before We Do," *Time*, May 27, 2010, https://time.com/.

you on the platform—to keep you addicted—by tracking your behavior like a dystopian digital Pavlov.

Let's try to bring all this together in a chart highlighting how different today's dopamine media ecosystem is from the TV-entertainment ecosystem of Postman's day.

	Entertainment Media	Dopamine Media
Physical Access	Limited by large TVs and plugs	Unlimited; available anywhere on mobile devices
Temporal Access	Limited by TV schedules	Unlimited; available anytime, on-demand
Personalization	Directed toward large audiences based on broad viewing data	Calibrated for individuals based on their personal data
Curation	Content curated by humans to resonate with broad audiences	Content curated by advanced AIs to addict particular individuals
Length	Programs run thirty to sixty minutes	Micro content: thirty to ninety seconds, sometimes shorter
Variable Rewards	Limited by what was available via channel surfing	Constant; digital slot machines

"Amuse" doesn't quite describe the effect dopamine media has on us. Dopamine media is designed to *distract* us to death. Or, if we're more honest, to distract us into an addiction that leads to death. Research shows that the more available and normalized a drug is, the more pervasive addiction to that drug becomes. So it's no surprise the vast majority of American adults are walking around shooting up digital dope without raising an eyebrow. The best of us are responsible users who can consume media in moderation. But none of us is fully sober.

The addiction trade-off that dopamine media offered us isn't a *possibility*; it's already here. And if the first victims of our addiction

are our time and attention span, the second (and far more important) victims are our families and relationships.

Research shows that the more addicted you become to dopamine-producing behaviors, the less your brain rewards you for being in relationship with others. This is even true of rats: if a free rat finds a caged rat, it will try to free it. But if you allow that rat to self-administer heroin, it will no longer be interested in the caged rat. The heroin gives a better high, after all.

Our addiction to dopamine media is training us to love much what ought to be loved little. It's making us miserably unhappy, hurting our relationships, and demanding more and more of our time to get the next high. Augustine wrote,

> The person who lives a just and holy life is one who is a sound judge of these things. He is also a person who has ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less (or love too little what should be loved more), or love two things equally if one of them should be loved either less or more than the other, or love things either more or less if they should be loved equally.[20]

Dopamine media is the most powerful, pervasive, and engineered form of communication technology in human history, and it's not shaping us to love Jesus most. It's not shaping us to love our neighbor. It's shaping us into pleasure-seeking addicts. Christians must recognize that, at its heart, this technological revolution has resulted in an institutional, relational, and formational crisis for the church.

20 Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.27–28.

Institutional Crisis for Churches in Digital Las Vegas

Yuval Levin defines institutions as "the durable forms of our common life" and "the frameworks and structures of what we do together."[21] While I don't expect most people to get excited by words like *institution* and *institutional*, Christians must understand that Jesus not only announced "the gospel of the kingdom" but also established that kingdom by his death and resurrection. His kingdom is, of course, a durable social structure that orders common life and gives a framework not only for our ethical norms but also for the smaller structures (families, small groups, communes) that collectively form the larger ones (churches, parishes, denominations). Local churches are designed to bridge God's kingdom on earth and heaven.

Brad Edwards, a pastor and writer, argues that social media platforms are "pseudo-institutions" and "counter-institutions."[22] They mimic what real-world institutions can offer—think faux community, faux discourse, faux authenticity, faux intimacy, faux mentorship, faux wisdom—and in the process destabilize the very institutions they mimic. As digital addiction drives more people to seek influence and mentorship online, localized institutions will undergo a crisis of authority. As digital addiction drives more people to find connections and conversation online, they will undergo a crisis of community. As digital addiction drives more people online to find information and wisdom, they will undergo a crisis of moral norms.

What does this mean for the future of the church and evangelism globally? At the very least, it means Christians must

21 Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic, 2020), 19.

22 Brad Edwards, "The Church amongst the Counter-Institutions," Mere Orthodoxy, April 1, 2021, https://mereorthodoxy.com/.

recontextualize the gospel not only in light of their local milieu but in light of a global digital milieu made up of hundreds of thousands of AI-tailored microcultures. This is no small task, and it's one that requires a sovereign, transcendent, all-knowing Lord to guide us.

Thankfully, such a person sits on the throne of heaven.

As much as we may wish to cloister ourselves from dopamine media, we must instead take confidence in the power of God's grace. He knows more than the AIs. He has more resources than big tech. His spirit can heal broken minds. He commands time itself. We're not on the losing side of a pointless battle. Instead, we're serving a King who's calling us to ask once more how we can be faithful in our generation and offer his healing in a broken, digital dopamine-addicted world.

Discussion Questions

1. Is Miller right in classifying our phones with other drugs? Consider how many times you pick up your phone or computer each day. If your phone is a "digital syringe," would you say you're a tech addict?

2. Now that most of us have an idea of the drastically negative mental health effects of "big tech," what prevents us from taking action on this knowledge? How can the church help communities and individuals break free from this cycle?

3. After reading this chapter, try listing out some of the costs and benefits of the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence. Why is it so critical to consider whether a technology is a net gain or net loss for us as individuals and communities?

4. At the end of the chapter, Miller posits that the advent of dopamine media has resulted in a "crisis for the church." How might dopamine media directly oppose the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:36–40)?