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OUT OF HOURS

## Are we too narcissistic?

Peter Aird

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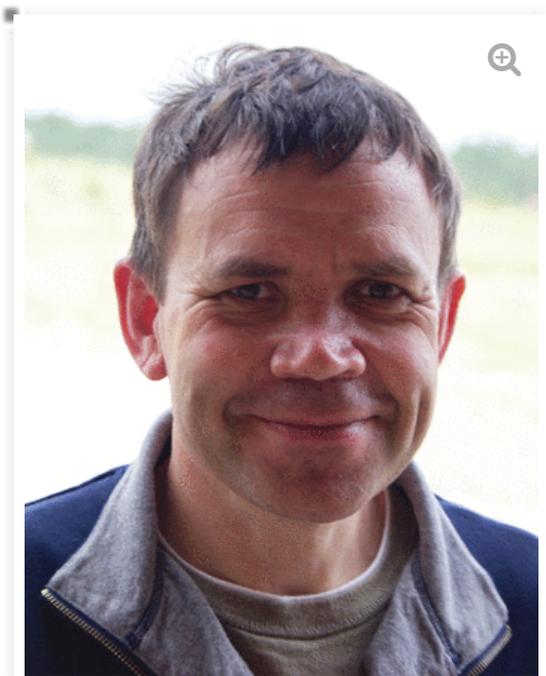
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In the preface to his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman compares the concerns of Orwell in 1984 with those of Huxley in *Brave New World*. He writes: "**Orwell feared those who would deprive 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':<sup>1</sup>**

Writing in 1985, long before the advent of Facebook and Twitter supported his view that Huxley, not Orwell, was right, Postman made the point that the very presence of a medium demands that it is filled, regardless of whether there is anything worthwhile to be said. **Today, a scholarly article on Facebook barely attracts a 'Like', whereas a photo of a dog balancing biscuits on its nose goes viral.** Mind you, the picture was amusing; by which I mean, of course, it required no thought. Perhaps I'm just a grumpy old man, guilty of *triste supercilium* — intellectual snobbery — but it seems trivia reigns.

Could this also be true for medicine? We cannot pretend to consider all that is presented to us by even the most respected journals, let alone lesser publications. The media add their opinion and the result is that, as the juggernaut of medical opinion lumbers on to the next health-related hot potato seeking its own 15 minutes of infamy, nobody left in its wake knows what to believe. **The significant is lost in a sea of trivia.**

So perhaps we should stop talking so much; at least until we really, really know what's worth saying. Let's not fill medical journals just because there are pages left to fill. Let's not run day conferences just because we did last year. And let's not then make it a requirement for others to attend those courses to hear our chatter. Ancient wisdom calls us to *'Be still'*.<sup>2</sup> Such a phrase doesn't refer just to the absence of movement, it's a call to shut up for a bit and realise we don't know what we're talking about half the time. Understand this and we may avoid imposing on our patients 'medical advances' that today seem worthwhile only for us to realise tomorrow that they had dubious health benefits and significant adverse effects.

But, alas, we have to be seen to be learning to comply with revalidation. And to prove we are, we must reflect on how the learning we have undertaken has helped us, lest we conclude that it hasn't. Ironically, the educationalists who, not so long ago, encouraged us to understand our learning style and play to our strengths, now insist that reflection is king. All learning styles are equal, but, it seems, some learning styles are more equal than others. **It seems to me that those of us who are reflective by nature aren't activist enough to record the process, while those of us who are activist enough to record their reflections aren't reflective enough to have anything to reflect on!**

So let's stop adding to the mindless noise with our reflections on ourselves. We're really not that interesting. Narcissus, from whose name we get the words 'sleep' and 'numbness', came to a soggy end. Let's wake up and feel something; something other than the sense of being drowned by the sea of information surrounding us.

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